

Maja Chacińska
University of Gdańsk

Kazimierz Musiał
University of Gdańsk

What is Conspicuous about the Nordic Countries in Poland? Past and Present Constructions of *Norden* in the Polish Press

From being regarded as an insignificant and relatively poor region of the continent and on the outskirts of European affairs in the beginning of the twentieth century, a hundred years later the Nordic countries have gained a reputation for being some of the most advanced, prosperous, progressive, and happy nations in the world. The real and palpable achievements of the Nordic economies and societies notwithstanding, the changing image of both the individual countries in the region, and of the Nordic community as a whole, has been constructed by the international print media in relation to their political affiliation or current political and social developments. This analysis looks at the Polish press and demonstrates that the Nordic stories, especially those concerning the present, tend to be constructed as utopian and progressive, rather than as dystopian ones that would be more characteristic of Western European discourse. Accordingly, the Nordic exceptionalism that is covered by the term the Nordic or Scandinavian model still serves more often as inspiration rather than a bogeyman in the general discourse of western-style modernization in Poland.

Key Words: Nordic countries, welfare state, Nordic model, Polish press

Introduction

The increase in prosperity and well-being of the inhabitants in the Nordic region, along with the social change signified by political and social progressive policies, have been an attractive subject for the international press for many years (Musiał 2002; Marklund 2016; Hakoköngäs, Kivioja and Kleemola 2021). In this paper, we look closely at the interest in Nordic/Scandinavian exceptionalism in the Polish press during two important periods in modern Polish history, the interwar period and the years after 1989. During both periods, Poland regained independence and became a sovereign state on par with its European neighbors; yet Polish journalism functioned on the periphery or semi-periphery of the world's media

centres. Polish public opinion, in general, and the Polish press, in particular, had little significance for the Nordic countries' international image, but the Polish press has significantly contributed to shaping Polish public opinion about the Nordic countries.

The paper pursues a working hypothesis that in both periods in question the Polish press provided a discursive framework in which representations of the individual Nordic states were mediated and reconstructed to match the preferences of the readers. It is asserted that, for the most part, the Polish press followed the international media's narratives that constructed many images and stereotypes about Scandinavia. As a result, in Poland, too, a monolithic and often idealized image of the Nordic model, including the welfare state, social justice, tolerance, and openness, has grown increasingly ambiguous in recent decades and the image of a realized utopia has been tarnished by dystopian notions of more recent origin.

1. Method and Sources

The publication process of newspapers, dailies and weeklies, requires a quick reaction to evolving events in society at large, both at home and abroad. Furthermore, one of the causes of publications about the situation abroad are political developments in the country where particular papers are published. In both cases, journals, like other media, make an extensive use of stereotypes. This is so, for one thing, to economize on time-consuming fact-finding, and, for another, to be able to reach the cognitive system of readers in the most efficient and straightforward manner. Even though few journalists today would accept that simple stereotyping is part of their job, stereotyping is, certainly, a part of our cognition (Bartmiński 1995: 253). It also becomes a part of the informational strategy of modern states that use place branding to construct their most agreeable image, in expectation of economic gains that accrue from this (cf. Kythor 2020).

Stereotypes are not simple analytical units because viewing them as representative of a whole society or a nation is problematic. What seems apparent, though, is that the cultural background of any observer comes into play and he or she looks at the national character of a people through his or her own cultural spectacles (Berting and Villain-Gandossi 1995: 17). Stereotypes are also interesting on account of their long life; they remain valid for several generations and ultimately come to be regarded as components of a cultural heritage. In this regard, previous research concerning xeno-stereotypes of the Nordic countries provides an invaluable point of departure and a frame of reference. A matrix for this kind of analysis has been provided by elaborations of the way in which the British and American press in the interwar period constructed a from rags-to-riches success story with regard to the Nordics (Musiał 2002; Hale 2009; Rom-Jensen 2017), and by other studies offering a more general reflection on how the press and other

media influence Scandinavian stories-we-live-by (Clerc, Glover and Jordan 2015; Andersson and Hilson 2009).

In this paper, we put to use similar analytical instruments with regard to the Polish press and cover two decades of the interwar period and over two decades of the period after 1989. The period between 1939 and 1989 is omitted because censorship and strong ideological framings during World War II or in the People's Republic of Poland between 1945 and 1989 would require a discussion of propaganda and political communication in non-democratic regimes, which is beyond the scope of this text.

For a close reading of the Polish press from both periods, we have employed content analysis with some statistical data in support of our conclusions. Following Thomas Huckin's (2004: 20–21) advice regarding content analysis, we have investigated a selected corpus with some notion of what might emerge, but not with a clear hypothesis. As such, the texts examined were not used for hypothesis-testing but rather for exploratory purposes enabling discourse analysis.

The main criteria for selecting relevant journals from the interwar period were linked to their interest in topics relating to Scandinavia and to their representativeness in relation to the main political currents in Polish politics. The dailies examined here are the right-wing *Kurier Poznański*, the socialist *Robotnik*, and peasant party journals like *Piast*, *Zielony Sztandar*, and *Wyzwolenie*. Magazines like *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* and *Świat* were politically unaffiliated but are very rich in articles related to Scandinavia. They can be categorized as dealing with broad socio-political and cultural issues of the day. The search for relevant articles was guided by earlier research into interwar Polish press images of Scandinavia conducted by Paweł Jaworski (2001).

Regarding the corpus of texts from the post-1989 period, we selected a daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza* (1989–2016), and three weeklies, *Polityka*, *Wprost* (from the period 1989–2010), and *Gość Niedzielny* (2010–2016). *Gazeta Wyborcza* was founded by opposition journalists from the Solidarity movement before the first free election in Poland in 1989, and today the newspaper is considered to express liberal values. *Polityka* and *Wprost* are the leading Polish weeklies. *Polityka* has always been a left-wing journal and is an employee-cooperative. In the period analysed, *Wprost* was a right-wing conservative weekly, and *Gość Niedzielny* was a conservative weekly, expressing the values of the Roman Catholic Church and its views. During the period analysed, both *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka* had correspondents in Stockholm, and the views expressed and the images portrayed in the articles largely reflect the values and views of those correspondents. The shifting perspective of *Gazeta Wyborcza* toward liberal values is best exemplified by the changing tone of articles on feminism published in this paper.

Since the late 1990s, all the papers analysed have had various forms of online editions and the accelerating digital turn in circulation of the newspapers makes it difficult to determine the exact number of potential readers. However, in our analysis we focus more on the construction of the representations by significant

actors in the journalism field and not on the actual reception of these representations and their social consequences. In both analysed periods, the newspapers chosen covered a vast range of topics concerning Scandinavia; in the contemporary material, more than fifty different categories were identified, with up to 350 articles or references apiece. In this paper we only analyse the most common topics, each of which was mentioned in 40–140 articles or references.

2. The Interwar Period (1918–1939) – “The Smile of Scandinavia”¹

In the interwar period, the economic prosperity of the Nordic countries evoked quite substantial interest in Poland. Arguably, this happened mainly because there were striking differences and contrasts between prosperity and general welfare in the Nordic and Polish societies. As one journalist in 1934 claims, the distance between Poland and Denmark could not be measured “in thousands of kilometres or sea miles. Our distance to its culture amounts to some one hundred years...” (Radzimiński 1934: 23). As early as 1918, it was reported that there were five hundred millionaires in Denmark among three million inhabitants, and that even ordinary people apparently “had cash in abundance” (Bogate państwo 1918: 303). Apart from the fact that the Nordic countries did not take part in World War I, which explained their affluence for most journalists, it is the evolutionary rather than the revolutionary character of Scandinavian social change that are highlighted as being key to their success (Dębicki 1923: 476).

Gradualism and evolution are noted as peculiar features of Nordic politics and the examples substantiating this claim are seen, inter alia, in the relationship between the Scandinavian monarchs and the socialists or communists. Peaceful conflict resolution and the lack of radicalism in the socialist movement, which later became intrinsic features of the Nordic welfare state, were already observable in the 1920s. In Sweden, the dominant Social Democratic Party “is fully reconciled with the monarchy,” as is noted by a journalist reporting from Stockholm. He adds a joke about the socialist leader Hjalmar Branting, who allegedly had a photograph of King Gustav V, personally signed, standing on his desk (Wejtko 1932: 41). The political culture of the region is seen as sophisticated, and one can spot gentlemen in top hats and umbrellas during communist rallies (Wejtko 1932: 41). Even publications printed in the socialist *Robotnik* describe strikes in Sweden as calm events without military or police intervention. This should not be surprising because, as is explained by an anonymous interlocutor, “the military is forbidden by the constitution to intervene within the country,’ while ‘almost all the police officers belong to the socialist party” (J.M. 1924: 1). Similar images also came from Copenhagen, where the author is amazed by the absence of police

¹ The title of one of the analyzed articles.

and the peaceful character of a massive socialist demonstration. “Obviously”, he concludes, “if only our socialists were similar, we could put the government into their hands without worrying” (Ludwiczak 1922: 2). As can be seen in this statement, direct allusions of journalists to matters back home made Scandinavia part of an argument in Polish politics.

In the early 1920s, the disastrous results of World War I were still very palpable in Poland, one of the burning social problems being the huge numbers of disabled people. This was obviously one of the reasons why the poet and literary critic Zdzisław Dębicki remarks in his reports that in Sweden no handicapped people are to be seen, commenting:

[T]he youth are healthy, and children are educated in the most beautiful and the best equipped schools in the world. The mean level of welfare is higher than that of many other west European countries that have been better equipped by nature. All people are well and neatly clad... Sweden undoubtedly counts among the happiest countries as far as its economy is concerned (Dębicki 1923: 476).

This prosperity and welfare are guaranteed by social solidarity that seems to be accepted by all levels and classes of society. “The set-up of all social groupings in the society appears very harmonious, which in other countries is still a distant goal” (Dębicki 1923: 476). In the same vein, it is universally recognized that one of the main features of the Nordic societies is equality – that is, “equality of all citizens not only in social awareness and conviction, but also in practical application, which was superior to the system practised in many republics” (Jedynak 1921: 6).

Equality means that no specific difference can be discerned between the intelligentsia, peasants, and workers, and hardly any great difference is apparent between the rich and the poor (Jakóbiec 1937: 7). As the average level of income and wealth was higher than in Poland, journalists highlight the fact that no slums exist in the cities and that even during the Great Depression the unemployed can count on social assistance and help.

Like the Anglo-American press reporting from Scandinavia, in the interwar period Polish journalists also discover this region as a model of modern development (Jaworski 2001: 351–352). Scandinavia provided patterns of technical innovation, and this was symbolized by mass access to the telephone – something that could be envied by other states: “A telephone in Sweden is as indispensable a component of life as, let’s say, a bicycle in Denmark or Holland or radio in Berlin. Rooms to let without a phone are not advertised – they do not exist” (Burkath 1935: 9).

Another device that symbolizes Swedish modernity for the same author is the radio. He was informed about how advanced radiophones and broadcasting were in Sweden: “Each young Swede is a dedicated radio amateur. In Uppsala, Dalarna or Skåne I saw aerials and telephone wires over each settlement in the countryside. These are the marks of culture, the existence of which I could never imagine before” (Burkath 1935: 9).

Like Sweden, Denmark is also called “the kingdom of the radio,” as a result of over half a million radio receivers being registered in the country (Burkath 1937: 2).

Henceforth, technology-based progressive development became an established component of the Nordic model in the Polish mind, similar to promotion of women’s rights and feminism. In 1930 Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, a medical doctor, writer and one of the most famous Polish journalists of the interwar period, wrote a collection of essays entitled *Piekło Kobiet* (Women’s Hell). It caused much debate by describing the consequences of the penalization of abortion and the double standards for men and women that were sanctioned by the conservative and wealthier strata of society (Boy-Żeleński 1930). Arguments stemming from the Nordic countries came in handy and were eagerly employed in a debate concerning the question of maternity and family welfare. When Denmark changed stipulations of its penal code concerning abortion, making them less restrictive, *Robotnik* quotes a Danish medical doctor who criticizes the old penal code’s “murder paragraph,” which protected an unborn child even though some newborn babies were bound to starve. Referring to the new Danish legislation, the author asks the Polish government to do away with the “senseless law” that severely punishes abortion in Poland (*Co się poprawiło w państwie duńskim* 1932: 16). The Danish doctor’s words could actually be ascribed to any proponent of changes in the Polish penal code.

Although the issues of equal rights between the sexes, as well as those of the feminist movements, have become obvious elements to be studied in Nordic societies today, reports on the position and status of women were part of a broader picture of the Nordic countries presented by journalists in the interwar period as well. In 1927, the French publication of *Jérôme 60° latitude nord* by Maurice Bedel was, because of its notoriety, also read in Poland, where it sparked an interest in getting to know more about the liberated and allegedly easy-going Nordic women². The book attracted the attention of journalist Józef Wejtko, who felt the need to verify Bedel’s allegations when reporting from Sweden. Swedish women are encouraged, he writes, to be more liberated than their Polish counterparts, and they are handsome, friendly, and natural (Wejtko 1932: 42). The majority of women and girls have blond hair – it is reported – but they hardly use any lipstick as their colouring is naturally beautiful and highlighted by the characteristic good mood visible on their faces. They dress well and play sports; the wealthier go horse-riding, play tennis, drive cars, row, and swim a lot, whereas their poorer friends substitute long walks for such luxurious sports. Most of women are vocationally active and, even without economic necessity, they will work so as not to be idle, or they learn languages, study, or learn practical things. What was remarkable is the lack of the “unhealthy erotic atmosphere that to a greater or lesser extent can be witnessed

² In 1927 the book was awarded the Prix Goncourt and was the subject of heated exchanges between Norway and the author.

in other countries". Women and men enjoy equal and friendly relations, without much anxiety or reverence being demonstrated (Wejtko 1932: 42).

The image of liberated Swedish women was apparently very new, even for the richer classes of Polish society, which remained quite conservative and traditionalist. In the countryside, the differences between Poland and Scandinavia would be less striking, although even within peasant families, some examples of progressive relationships between men and women could be found in Scandinavia. The Danish countryside was used to make this point:

A Danish woman in the countryside takes care of the house and its near surroundings, does not work in the field and even leaves milking the cows to men. This has a good impact on housekeeping and household equipment (Jaworski 1931: 323).

In the interwar period, few Polish observers stayed long enough in the Nordic countries to be able to go into detail about specific regulations and laws, apart from those relating to abortion (which may be seen as akin to family policy). For that reason, the reports were often superficial and featured the solutions that the reporters found distinctively different from what they had left back home. Nevertheless, as early as in 1920, a Polish correspondent from Norway, writing for the socialist daily *Robotnik*, notes that in Scandinavia assistance is provided and benefits paid to all mothers, regardless of their marital status. He criticizes the legislation passed by the Polish parliament that stops payment of maternity benefits to unmarried women and single mothers. This fact arguably blemishes the legislation of modern Poland and can scarcely find approbation in the eyes of "civilized humankind" (Trzebiński 1920: 2). With reference to the same issue of maternity benefits, in 1924 the Polish ambassador to Copenhagen calls Denmark a "very progressive" country (ZNiO 1924).

Another issue that attracted attention was the situation of elderly people, whose retirement pension at over sixty allowed them greater freedom of choice. A correspondent for *Zielony Sztandar* in Denmark draws attention to Danish care centres for the elderly or "seniors' villages," as he calls them. For him, the seniors' villages are proof that the elderly enjoy the highest esteem and care in society, while not being a burden to their children and grandchildren (A.S.B. 1938: 5).

A correspondent of the Catholic newspaper *Kultura* looks at the situation of the young generation in Denmark, where she notes that children do not wander alone in the city streets, but are occupied and taken care of either in kindergartens, spacious playgrounds, or formidable parks. All in all, she concludes, "Denmark has the best managed childcare and youth care, as great care is taken with regard to the education and good upbringing of the young generation" (Turowska 1939: 5).

3. The Post-Cold War Period (1989–2010) – “Ups and Downs of the Welfare State”³

The post-Cold War period brought new topics into the debate on the Nordic countries, although the whole discourse rested upon several older notions, some of which had already been formulated in the interwar period. In all three newspapers analysed, Nordic countries are very often referred to as welfare states practicing the Swedish model or “the Third Way model”⁴. After 1989, such frames appealed to many Polish readers because the famous welfare model in Northern Europe epitomized a system of social justice that the emerging neoliberal state in Poland did not deliver. The Nordic way of controlling the economy and delivering social innovations that also secured civic rights regardless of individually accumulated wealth was, therefore, appreciated and propagated as an ideal type, and the Nordic states were seen as examples of a realized utopia (cf. Anioł 2013).

Nordic countries are often given as examples of “wealthy countries” in articles on various topics. In an article in *Polityka* about Polish labour emigration in the late 2000s, Joanna Solska writes that Poles often choose Nordic countries because of their wealth (Solska 2009). There are also many articles in which the name of a given Nordic country is preceded by the phrase “one of the richest countries in...” (Krzemiński 2001: 10).

A good life and happiness are other themes connected with welfare that are often mentioned in the Polish press with regard to the Nordic model (Cegielski 1992a: 6). *Polityka* regularly published the UN Human Development Index, in which the Nordic countries usually make the top ten, and, according to the index in 2004, Norway was the country in which life was the best in the world (Walat 2004b: 52).

Another characteristic often referred to in the description of welfare states is their possession of an extensive system of social benefits (Kruczkowska 1992: 4; Eysymontt 1993: 12; Eklund 1996: 3). Some journalists praise the idea and some blame it for the crisis of the welfare state: “Benefits for rental, children, in case of sickness, unemployment, benefits like from a horn of plenty,” writes *Gazeta Wyborcza* in 1993 (Zbiniewicz 1993: 16). In 2009 *Wyborcza* claims, slightly cynically, that Scandinavia is the best place to be unemployed: “It is dark and cold here, but you’ll get by. The state pays the unemployed 80–90% of the last income even for up to four years” (Mitraszewska 2009: 32).

In the early 1990s, as a result of the economic crisis faced by the Nordic countries the image offered of these welfare states became dystopian (Cegielski 1990: 7; Szoszkiewicz 1998), and the titles of several articles demonstrate how the situation was evaluated at that time: “The Bankruptcy of the Great Protector” (Zagrodzka

³ The title of one of the analyzed articles.

⁴ There are 110 articles or paragraphs/references on the topic “welfare states,” 99 on the “wealthy nation”.

1994: 10), “Something is Rotten in the State of Sweden” (Białkowska 1990: 4), and “Is it the End of the Swedish Model?” (Szulkin 1992: 16). However, the image changes slightly again in the 2000s, when the press starts to praise the Nordic welfare state – with the exception of Iceland – especially for handling the 2008 crisis so well (Pawlicki 2010: 9; *Gospodarka w skrócie* 2010: 24).

Despite the dystopian image of the economy in the 1990s, in articles analysed from the 1990s and 2000s, Nordic countries are often described as modern, innovative, and competitive. This description is the sixth most common in the newspapers examined. The papers usually estimate the level of modernity by the number of telephones and computers and the degree of internet access, and Nordic countries are often given as examples of best practice in those areas. In 1996, *Gazeta Wyborcza* calls Sweden “The Phone Kingdom” (Rożyński 1996: 24). Other signs of a modern country, according to those papers analysed, are the number of computers in schools and the degree of internet access. Hence, the papers declare that Sweden has the best-developed internet in Europe (Cegielski 1997: 16) and that the Nordic countries lead the new economy and should be called “the Vikings of the Internet” (Hausman 2001).

Another image that those newspapers analyzed frequently offer in the post-Cold War period is that of the Nordic countries as strong supporters of equal rights. There are, however, differences in the perceptions of equal rights depending on the newspaper and on the period of time analyzed. It is interesting to read Piotr Cegielski’s (*Gazeta Wyborcza*) articles from the 1990s, which from the perspective of 2021 seem chauvinistic and haughty, as he seems to mock the strong position of women in Sweden, calling quotas for women in the Swedish parliament “equal rights going absurd” (Cegielski 1994: 7). According to him, the quota is an idea whereby “regardless of qualifications, predisposition, and experience every second minister and PM from the [Social Democratic – note M.Ch., K.M.] party must be a woman” (Cegielski 1994: 7).

In 1995, Cegielski argues that as a result of failure in the economic field, Swedish Social Democrats are trying to gain people’s support in other areas and so they are promoting a policy of obligatory “feminization” (sic!) (Cegielski 1995: 8). It seems impossible that Cegielski, who had lived in Sweden for quite a long time, did not notice that “feminization,” as he calls it, had been a long-term process in Sweden. He may have thought that Polish readers were not prepared for such concepts at that time and would find them disturbing; so he chooses to construct them as dystopian and inevitably self-destructive.

It is worth noting that Polish newspapers show the struggle for equality in the Nordic countries as not only concerning male-female issues. Nordic countries are perceived in the newspapers analysed as open and supportive with regard to the LGBT community (Cegielski 1993: 7; Górny 2005). The selected newspapers always write about any countries that legalize civil partnerships, marriage, or adoption for homosexual couples, even in the early 1990s when in Catholic Poland

any political discussion about these kinds of laws was unthinkable. Most articles on these topics are very reliable, factual, and free of personal opinions (Bidakowski 1994:18; Cosic 2009; Cytaty 2002: 14). In the 2000s, *Gazeta's* general pro-feminist discourse becomes outspoken, and there is a total shift in the newspaper's perception and presentation of equal rights in the Nordic countries (Kublik 2002a: 8; Kublik 2002b: 8). Around 2005, *Gazeta Wyborcza* becomes a strong advocate of instituting a quota for women in the Polish parliament, and the Nordic countries are often presented as exemplifying best practice in this area (Tubylewicz 2006: 12; Kublik 2009: 2; Milewicz 2009: 15). Equal rights in Nordic countries are also often mentioned in articles concerning high birth rate and state family policy; the reasons for high birth rates are seen in the equal division of childcare between mothers and fathers (Podgórska and Mazurczyk 2005: 78). After 2004, when it became obvious that Poland was struggling with a very low birth rate, articles and brief notices about the birth rate began to appear regularly in all three analysed newspapers. The Nordic countries (and France) are most often given as examples of how progressive family policy contributes to high birth rates⁵.

Nevertheless, the Nordic family model is not always seen through rose-colored lenses. For instance, in 2005 *Wprost* presents the Nordic family model from a conservative and Roman Catholic point of view and claims that Swedish law stimulates the destruction of family ties and illustrates this thesis with some statistics showing that 60% of children are born out of wedlock and that around 40,000 children are raised by homosexual couples (Górny 2005). This kind of approach was emblematic for the period when *Wprost* was at its right-wing extreme⁶.

While completely absent in the observations from the interwar period, commentary linked to immigrants and Islam in Nordic countries has risen constantly since 1989. There is a certain dichotomy in conveying the image of Nordic countries in terms of their relation to immigrants. Historically, they are perceived and described as open to immigrants (Grodzka 1992: 12) but both the 1990s and 2000s give a dystopian image of societies that once were tolerant and open but have ended up as xenophobic or at least less tolerant than expected.

In the 2000s, the papers clearly state that even if racism and hostility towards strangers in Nordic countries have officially been non-existent for a long time, they have now emerged from beneath the surface (Śladkowski 2001: 20). The papers show that anti-immigrant movements are clearly starting to grow in Nordic social and political life and that a tolerant attitude is at this point only a part of a political correctness policy (e.g. anti-immigrant parties' election victories, Pszczółkowska 2002: 10; decreasing tolerance for manifestations of Islam in public life, Kazimierczyk 2009: 11).

⁵ There are 59 articles that are about or mention this theme.

⁶ The author is a founder of the conservative and anti-political-correctness magazine *Fronda*.

Seen from the perspective of what is a relatively homogenous Polish population⁷, the problem of immigrants in Nordic countries, as presented in the press, may at first seem slightly exotic. But since the 2004 EU negotiations and EU accession in 2005, the context has changed. Poles have followed press reports on the matter of immigrants, as they themselves have become interested in labour emigration to Nordic countries. The picture presented by the papers has not been positive in this aspect either. There are many reports of negative developments, such as the Swedish government's changing its mind about letting Poles work in Sweden without any transition period (Walat 2004a: 68). Positive and welcoming attitudes are only described with regard to Polish doctors and nurses when Scandinavia experiences a lack of medical staff (Hajnosz 2004: 8), while open protests against cheap Polish workers since EU accession are widespread (Kuźmicz 2006: 32).

4. 2010–2015 – “Happy as a Viking”

After 2010, the dystopian image of the Nordic Model in *Gazeta Wyborcza* almost disappears. Even in the difficult year 2015, when the immigration crisis was at its peak, there are more positive than negative descriptions of how Sweden, Norway, and Denmark handle the problem. The Nordic Model of the welfare state is still mostly described in terms of equality, egalitarian spirit, and benefits, but also more in depth analysis is published in *Wyborcza*, for example, on positive changes within the model.

Perhaps the most important analysis of the Nordic Model was written in *Gazeta* by Wojciech Orliński under the striking title “Happy as a Viking”. The author begins by stating that the so-called “Scandinavian model” has fascinated him for a long time and he provides his definition of the phenomenon:

The famous Scandinavian model is not about high taxes or generous benefits. It is an agreement [between the State and the citizens – note M.Ch., K.M.] that the State will interfere with citizens' matters and the citizens will interfere with the matters of the State (Orliński 2015: 42).

To point out both similarities and differences of Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, and Icelandic approaches, Orliński describes the countries' historical relations going back to the Kalmar Union in the fourteenth century. Nowadays he sees more similarities than differences because:

⁷ According to the census of 2011, over 96% of the population said their nationality was only Polish and 87,7% identified themselves as Roman Catholics. The results of the previous census in 2002 were very similar (Gudaszewski 2015: 39, 95).

If anybody makes a list of the best countries in the world, no matter if it concerns lack of corruption, security, trust in the State or for fellow citizens, education, health or just general happiness these five countries will always be among top ten. Often they rank as the top five. Have they found the ideal form of political system? (Orliński 2015: 42)

Other positive themes characterizing the Nordic model that were not mentioned in previous periods are: trust in public institutions (Unger 2011: 10), participatory democracy (Jędrzyk 2011: 22), lifelong learning (Kublik 2012: 8), and good crisis management (Gadomski 2013: 11).

When in the years 2011–2015 *Gazeta* continued its equal rights battle for Polish women, the Nordic countries became salient as examples of good practice. In one article entitled “How to fight your way to paradise,” all the Nordic countries are described as very equal in an affirmative tone. In an article from 2012, the Swedish ambassador to Poland encourages Polish men to take parental leave. He writes about his own experience when he decided to spend two months at home with his daughter although he had been promoted within the Prime Minister’s chancellery only six months earlier (Herrström 2012: 9).

Feminism was an especially relevant topic in Poland in 2013 when the Roman Catholic Church and conservative parties fought a war over the issue of “gender” The word was not translated into Polish, but rather the English word was used. It became synonymous with modern ideas that are against a “natural order of God” and Polish tradition.

As in the previous analysed periods between 2011–2015, *Gazeta Wyborcza* also praises Nordic care for families and the countries’ approach to demographic problems. Some favorable statistics from Nordic countries are quoted and ways to encourage women to have children are listed in 15 articles from this period. For example in 2012, Finland, Denmark, and Sweden are mentioned as countries with long periods of parental leave and public nurseries for all children from the age of 12 months (Leszczyński 2012: 24).

The period between 2011–2015 was also a time for increased economic immigration of Poles to the United Kingdom, Norway, Iceland, and Sweden. *Gazeta* publishes several accounts of legal problems that Polish families encounter concerning methods of bringing up their children, for example using corporal punishment as a means of discipline. Articles describe the Norwegian social services *Bernevernet* and the Swedish organisation BRIS (Children’s Rights in Society). According to the newspaper, in 2014 alone, Barnevernet took away children from 34 Polish families. It seems from the content of the articles that *Wyborcza* supports Polish families in their struggle for control over their children, believing that the Norwegian and Swedish services often act prematurely. There are, however, some articles in which Scandinavian authorities are defended (e.g. Tubylewicz 2015: 23).

Unsurprisingly, the ultra-conservative, Roman Catholic *Gość Niedzielny*, for the most part, paints a rather gloomy picture of family life in Sweden. In 2011, for

instance, it criticizes the Swedish family model for its “catastrophic character” that obviously ensued after Sweden introduced legislation against violence in the family in 1979. Parents in Sweden are now afraid of their children since the children can accuse them of being violent, which can easily result in a prison sentence and removing children from the family. The argument was raised in the wake of the Polish debate on the same issue in which arguably Swedish solutions were copied (Szwedzki Model Katastrofy 2010).

As mentioned earlier, in the whole period 2011–2015, there are almost twice as many positive articles about immigrants and refugees in the Nordic countries as negative ones (44 to 25). Even in the one article from 2015 that gives a clearly dystopian image of traditional Swedish openness by describing acts of arson committed against refugee camps, the author states at the very beginning: “Still many Swedes help the refugees (...), in the country that already is famous for its tolerance and the will to help others the wave of empathy has become even greater” (Czarnecki 2015: 11)

Apart from the above-mentioned article on arson attacks, *Gazeta* does not give the impression that the crisis has revealed the inadequacy or caused the destabilization of the Nordic Model. In one article on the crisis in the EU, it is mentioned that “Sweden is bursting at the seams,” but other than that the problems are described in a rather sober manner. In five articles, the reintroduction of border controls by Denmark and Sweden is mentioned (Applebaum 2015: 6).

The Breivik attack was obviously a major reason for writing about Scandinavia in general and Norway in particular. This included the conservative *Gość Niedzielny*. Between 2012 and 2015, altogether 118 articles mention the outrage in one way or another, seldom however generalizing on this event as being exemplary for the social tensions in the Nordic model that are due to immigrants. Mostly in 2011 and 2012, many articles criticize the multicultural society, but the journalists do not generalize or ascribe racism to the whole of Norway (e.g. Kabiesz 2011). This objective narrative is not surprising since Poles constitute the largest group of immigrants to Norway in the last decade⁸ and it is potentially very easy to verify the press narratives.

The conservative point of view was recalibrated after the 2015 election in Poland and after the national-conservative PiS (Law and Justice) party came to power. Its leader, Jarosław Kaczyński used Sweden as a dystopian model of migrants’ integration, where some quarters in big cities were allegedly ruled by Sharia law and not by Swedish law. The argument was used for broad audiences in the Polish parliamentary debate a couple of times. Even though *Gość Niedzielny* carefully steers away from acknowledging such an inaccurate statement, it also warns that Europe should learn from the Swedish failures in integrating immigrants with a Muslim background (Sękowski 2015).

⁸ On 1 January 2017 there were 97 200 Poles officially registered in Norway (*Innvandrere og norskfødte med innvandrerforeldre* 2021).

Conclusions

Whatever the dominant motivation has been for the Polish press to report from and about the Nordic countries, these countries have been constructed as distinctively different, for the most part, superior and very modern on all accounts, both in the interwar period and after 1989. In both periods the attention of different journals has followed a long-standing interest in Nordic patterns of modernization, with the Nordic countries constructed as harbingers of progress. Both in the interwar period and after 1989, they are seen as exemplary in facing contemporary social and economic challenges. This overall conviction notwithstanding, our analysis demonstrates that the political affiliation or ideological standing of the news agencies, publishing houses, and journalists involved were decisive for the content of Nordic-related stories. Accordingly, they are either utopian or dystopian and the Nordic countries serve as either an inspiration or as a bogeyman in the general discourse about Western-style modernization.

In the interwar period and at the time of the Great Depression, journalists showed the Nordic countries as realized utopias, underlining the contrast between “the happy nations” and the rest of the world weltering, as it was, in economic trouble. The themes mirror the burning issues of that era – among other things, the provision of social welfare, prosperity and well-being, cleanliness and hygiene, and the Nordic drive for equality. All Polish observations concerning everyday life in the region are permeated by appreciation and fascination, regardless of the character of the reports, be they diplomatic, journalistic, essayistic, literary, or political. While the interwar Nordic region undoubtedly enjoyed a higher standard of living and was counted among the most prosperous regions of Europe, the fact that the region was also the scene of political and social conflicts was generally ignored.

In the post-Cold War era, in turn, the mediation of Nordic reality by means of almost utopian images can still be observed, although a greater number of dystopian reports can be witnessed too. A reason for this may be much better opportunities to gain access to and verify information coming from different sources. In addition, Polish tourists have more personal experience of the Nordic countries, and, especially in recent years, an increasing number of the Polish workers have seen life and institutions in the Nordic states at close range. Nevertheless, as long as the palpable income discrepancy between Poland and the Nordic countries persists, images of the Nordic model as a realized utopia, or simply as socially attractive and more efficient from the economic point of view, are likely to maintain a strong foothold in Poland, regardless of dystopian images elsewhere.

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