

DEMOCRACY, FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION

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The Nordic Paradox

Political scientists agree that the Nordic area is the most integrated area in the world when you speak about independent national states. Most things, systems, way of thinking, of solving problems, bureaucracies, politics, economies, schools, culture, entertainment are similar or the same. Never mind that three countries are monarchies, two republics and that unity of languages is not total.

The paradox is that these states like to define themselves as a close Nordic community without having the political or popular will to take the next step: To become a real union of some sort. Instead, three of the countries have joined the European Union.

There are two or three separate but complementary dimensions of Nordic cooperation:

- 1) First, through the official structures of the states, the governments and the authorities on many levels.
- 2) In the second dimension the ordinary citizens create less formal networks in associations and fraternities, in sports, culture, whatever humans can invent.
- 3) A third and fast growing dimension is created in the business sphere, through acquisitions and mergers, defining the Norden area as one market.

Among the citizens the cooperation is very popular, probably because it is not obligating. The citizens would like to see more cooperation and integration, not less.

The Nordic cooperation and the so called Nordic Model of the welfare state has got a lot of attention during the last years due to the fact that the Nordic countries have placed themselves in the absolute top of most global indexes. What is behind this success?

Fundamental Nordic Values

Good institutions and well-balanced policies drive welfare in society. A high level of trust, sustainable growth, concern of the environment, education, democracy, freedom of expression and association, transparency, low levels of corruption, and relative gender equality. These are some of the fundamental Nordic values.

Historically the Nordic region also stands out as a "community of law"; indeed it was a community of law before the individual Nordic states were consolidated.

Nordic exceptionalism

Trust is a cornerstone of Nordic welfare society, business world and even politics. One can say that in societies with a high level of equality there is a high level of trust. People are, mostly happy to pay their taxes because they trust that they get something for it. There is a sense of collective responsibility. It is sometimes called the Nordic exceptionalism.

The welfare state is one of the three main explanations researchers cite for the high level of trust. The other two are cultural heritage and political stability. A welfare state offers benefits for everybody. This likely results in fewer social conflicts and less crime.

Some researchers hold that trust is a culturally determined phenomenon built up over time. In this perspective, social trust is primarily learned during childhood from parents and teachers, later developed by participation in voluntary associations.

Others point to the historical aspect of trust. The Nordic region has been a relatively peaceful corner in Europe.

Anyway – a high degree of trust is associated with a low level of public bureaucracy and almost non-existent corruption. You do not necessarily have to know the right people to succeed. It helps of course, to say anything else would be naive, but still you can reach high positions in the society although your parents or close relatives are ordinary people.

In this merit-based system, which is quite typical for the Nordic countries, people have access to social mobility in terms of education and jobs, according to their abilities.

According to some studies it is the most modern and individualistic countries, most notably the Nordic countries that are characterized by broad social trust. It is not enough to share values. Values also have to be translated into institutions, rules and legislation. Cultural and social values are not easily transferable across borders, but systems and policies that have proved to work well might still serve as an inspiration for others. Many of us believe in the power of the example.

The Arm's length principle

Nordic NGOs are often supported by the state. That goes for the Norden Associations as well. We apply for money and at the same time we criticize the governments for being too passive when it comes to further Nordic integration. Mostly it functions quite well.

That's is probably due to the fact that your opinions and activities are rather harmless you might say.

Perhaps so. But there is one interesting principle in this relationship – it is the so called Arm's length principle.

In order to ensure freedom of expression for example in arts and culture, but also in other fields of activities, grants and financial support is given without political strings attached. And with permission to criticize those who are in charge. Therefore the arms-length principle is fundamental in the relationship between for example the Nordic Associations and the Nordic Council of Ministers.

As one example of this I mention the editorial in the latest number of Norden Nu, which is the magazine for The Norden Association in Denmark. The editorial criticize Nordic Council of Ministers for not putting into action decisions that have been made for 10 years ago.

This is an example of a normal ongoing dialog between the citizens and the authorities.

For decades, almost 100 years, The Norden Associations have criticized their national governments for not doing enough to integrate the Nordic countries and not doing enough to make it easier for people to move from one Nordic country to another. And it is not more to it. It is a natural dialog which is crucial for any democratic society or society striving for democracy.

