

Book Review: Models of Democracy in Nordic and Baltic Europe: political institutions and discourse, edited by Nicholas Aylott

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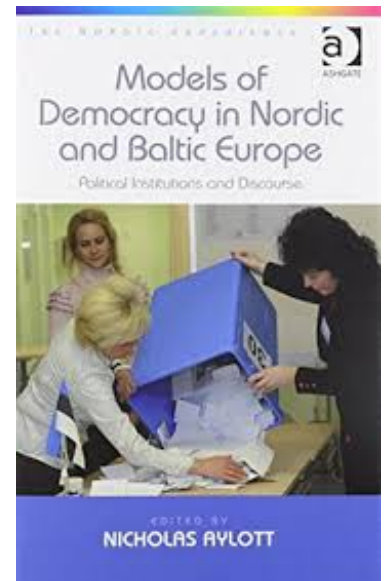
*Contributors in this volume aim to explore the possibility that some of the apparently successful institutional features of Nordic politics have somehow influenced politics in the Baltic states, despite the considerable contextual differences between the two groups. Of what is written in English on the Nordic Model there is little looking at its uptake in other countries, so this is a useful contribution, writes **Harry Evans**.*

***Models of Democracy in Nordic and Baltic Europe: Political Institutions and Discourse.* Edited by Nicholas Aylott. Ashgate. 2014.**

Find this book: 

This collection of essays forms part of the Nordic Experience research project, which looks to assess how identity and geo-politics interact in the Nordic region. The book as a whole is an excellent collection that will appeal to post-graduate researchers with an interest in the Baltic and Nordic regions. Each essay contributes both to the field of comparative analysis overall and also to its own separate research inquiry. The book is part of a [series](#) drawing on interdisciplinary analyses to explore the nature of Nordic identity further.

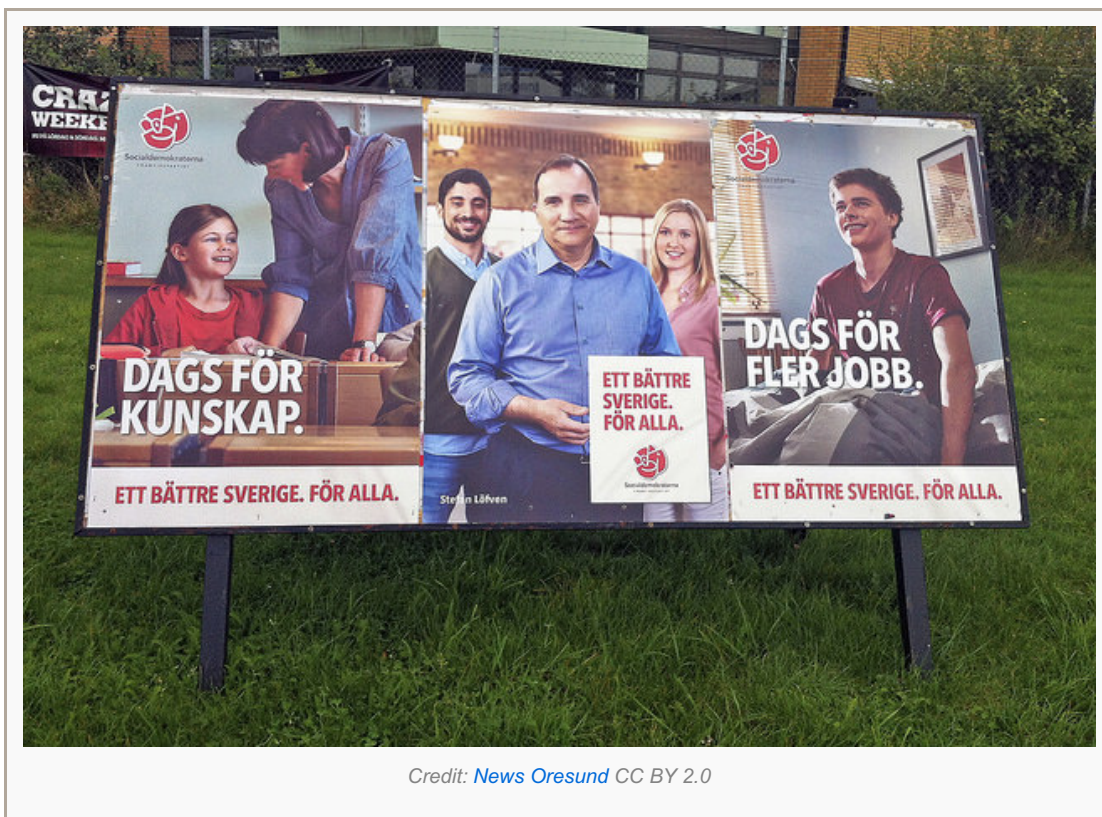
Editor [Nicholas Aylott](#) – a senior lecturer at Södertörn University, Sweden, specialising in comparative European politics, specifically party politics – writes in his introduction that the purpose of the papers is to describe and evaluate the diffusion of political ideas from the Nordic to Baltic regions. The focus on party politics is also mirrored in the essays, which deal primarily with diffusion between Nordic parties and Baltic parties.



For readers unfamiliar with the Nordic Model, this term refers to a collection of characteristics that are shared by Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. These political, social and cultural characteristics form a Nordic Model that is held up as an example for other countries to follow. A good example of this is the Nordic welfare systems that are considered to be both generous and egalitarian. Whilst there seems to be an enduring resilience to the idea of the Nordic Model, it is often argued to be lacking in substance or lacking in applicability to other systems and other countries.

However, it is a turbulent time for the Nordic Model. There seems to be a powerful family resemblance between the different Nordic countries, but the cohesiveness of this model seems to fluctuate (p.12). A recent [Economist feature](#) suggested that whilst the Nordic Model was still a strong one, it had now become a model for free markets, rather than the 'third way' ideology that made it famous. Despite this, the Nordic countries still score high on most measures of a paradisiacal society – wealth and equality (p.1) for example.

Baltic politics is on shifting sands too. Since the dismantling of Communist power structures in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, questions about what their new role should be in Europe have been raised. Estonia has been key in this – there were plans drawn up by Estonian politicians post-independence to redefine itself into the Nordic region (p.10). In the introduction, Aylott finds it reasonable to assume that there may have been significant diffusion from Nordic parties as new Baltic political parties attempted to establish themselves.



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This book does not conclusively confirm Aylott's hypothesis. Whilst most authors in the book do suggest there are some elements of Nordic inspiration apparent in Baltic parties, this is often negligible. I have chosen to look at one example where there is some evidence of Nordic-Baltic diffusion, and another where there was little evidence of such diffusion.

Chapter 3, "The Emergence of Conservative Parties in the Baltic States" by Karl Magnus Johansson, is particularly useful to read for those who, like me, are ill-acquainted with the intricacies of Baltic party dynamics. In that respect, the chapter provides an invaluable understanding for the other chapters that rely heavily on knowledge of the Baltic party system. Johansson begins the chapter with a detailed role call of the Conservative parties in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia and how they have at times merged. Johansson outlines the importance of key party players in developing embryonic parties. His analysis looks to examine whether transnational influences act through these key players.

In order to explore this, the research draws on interviews with key members of each party – usually leaders or heavyweights – as well as other historical evidence to examine the influence of foreign Conservative parties in the formation of the Baltic Conservative parties. Johansson shows that the parties were influenced significantly from the outset (p.107). Whilst the extent of this differed across countries and across parties, there were few cases where there was no transnational influence. The Swedish Moderates were frequently cited as a potential source of influence by various party leaders, though they were one among many. The German Christian Democrats and British Conservative Party were just as influential in the formation of the Baltic Conservative parties.

Chapter 6, "The Nordic Model and Estonian Political Discourse" by Kadri Simm and Külli Seppel, is perhaps one of the most interesting for Nordic scholars reading in English. Of what is written in English on the Nordic Model there is little looking at its uptake in other countries. Given that one of the key concerns about the Nordic Model is its applicability in foreign systems, the conclusions of this essay should be seen as relevant to a policy audience as well as an academic one.

The purpose of Simm and Seppel's research is to identify which issues are being imported, and by which groups are these issues being taken up (p. 182-3). To do this, Simm and Seppel analyse the newspaper discourse of seven key

Estonian politicians, across the ideological spectrum. Statements were then coded as to whether they fit into six different socio-political categories, such as the role of the state, and welfare distribution. After the analysis, the statements were then further categorised into separate discourses: knowledge-based economy; entrepreneurship; economic determinism and social dialogue. From this, the authors conclude that the most prevalent discourses in the Estonian discussion are primarily neo-liberal in nature – differing from the Nordic Model (p.202). They did however find that the Social Democratic Estonian politician appeared to mention Nordic topics more than the others, suggesting at a potential diffusion in the footsteps of the successful 20th century Social Democratic parties in Scandinavia. Simm and Sepel conclude that the reasons for a lack of diffusion for the Nordic Model may be just as complex as any diffusion – just because it has not migrated to Estonia doesn't mean that it cannot.

The book as a whole is an excellent collection of essays – each contributing both to the field of comparative analysis overall and also to their own separate research inquiries. There will be a different audience for each individual essay, but those focussing on domestic party politics in Europe will find these essays highly thought-provoking. The party politics focus of the work will perhaps make it less relevant to those looking at structural comparisons in Europe. Whether Nordic and Baltic democratic comparisons are a useful field to pursue further is an open question, but the researchers certainly show that 'there remain deep and enduring differences between Nordic and Baltic representative democracy' (Aylott, p.232).

Harry Evans is a Philosophy graduate of the University of York and he has also completed a Masters in Scandinavian Studies at UCL. He currently works as a research analyst at the Social Research Institute, Ipsos MORI, specializing in Health and Politics.

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