

# NEUTRALITY, DEMOCRACY, AND KINGS: THE POLITICAL IMAGE OF SWEDEN IN THE LATVIAN PRESS BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR\*

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The relationship between the Latvians and the Nordic countries has a long history, a consequence of sharing a geographical region. However, although there were several preconditions (first and most importantly – Protestant culture) for a similar pattern of development, in actual fact, because of the difference in political regimes, Latvian society developed along quite different lines from society in the Nordic countries. In the nineteenth century, the area of present-day Latvia formed part of the authoritarian Russian Empire, and it enjoyed democracy only after the establishment of the independent state in 1918. The course of history was interrupted in 1934, when an authoritarian regime was established in Latvia and remained in existence up to the occupation of the country by the Soviets in 1940. Meanwhile, wars and revolutions passed Sweden by, and during this whole period the country developed under democratic conditions. Sweden's economic achievements, political stability and security were exceptional in a positive sense, not only for the Baltic Sea region, but also for Europe as a whole.

Thus we reach the question of the image of Sweden in Latvian society. How did Latvians view Sweden's political system? Did they link their identity in any measure with the Nordic countries – first and foremost with Sweden, the largest and most influential country in the Nordic group – and if so, then to what extent? How did the view of Sweden change over time, and how may these changes be explained? At the same time, the image of the foreign country and the course of change and development it experienced constitute extensive material for the study of the identity of the Latvians themselves.

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The press provides important material for studies of images and identities in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Newspapers were among the most important sources of information, and the information published in newspapers in particular had a major influence on the attitude of society. In the nineteenth century, newspapers constituted one of the few forms of mass media. Widespread literacy promoted the publication of several newspapers.<sup>2</sup> The majority of the newspapers were concentrated in Riga. Although different in political stance, major newspapers like *Latviešu Avīzes*, *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, *Baltijas Zemkopis* had a considerable share of the readers among both the urban and rural population. In the 1920s and 1930s, there did appear other media like radio that competed with newspapers, but because the press was so extensive and diverse, the papers were able to retain their dominant role as providers of public information.<sup>3</sup>

In this study, textual analysis is applied to four major sets of publications in which Sweden was viewed through the prism of politics. The first set relates to the visit to Riga by Oscar II of Sweden in 1875 – the first occasion in the history of the Latvian press when the papers published information about Sweden that was relatively extensive for its time, concentrated and based on firsthand experience. The second set consists of publications that appeared shortly before and during the First World War, when the number of articles on Sweden increased significantly. These articles mainly focus on the analysis of Sweden's position during the war and the question of its continued neutrality. The third set, in chronological terms, consists of publications on domestic policy developments in Sweden from the beginning of the 1920s up to the 1934 coup d'état in Latvia. During this period, newspapers representing a variety of political views devoted considerable attention to developments in Sweden, analyzing and assessing these developments. The fourth set of publications relates to the visit of King Gustav V to Latvia in 1929. On this occasion, during a relatively short time (the first half of 1929), Latvian newspapers published a greater number of articles on Sweden than has appeared at any time before or since. The final set

<sup>1</sup> For instance, Oulu University has long traditions in the research of images in historical context, also using newspapers as the prominent source for analysis of the past. One good example is *Looking at the other – historical study of images in theory and practice*, ed. by Kari Alenius, Olavi K. Fält, Seija Jalagin (Oulu: University of Oulu, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Andrejs Plakans, *A concise history of the Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 233.

<sup>3</sup> On the Latvian press, c.f.: 20. *gadsimta vēsture, II: neatkarīgā valsts, 1918–1940*, ed. by Valdis Bērziņš (Rīga: Zinātne, 2003), 764–785.

consists of publications concerning Sweden's policy on the eve of the Second World War. Just as before the First World War, these publications are dominated by the theme of neutrality and the question of Sweden's possible stance in the event of war. In the Latvian press under authoritarianism (from 1934), as in the time of Tsarist Russia, domestic policy issues of foreign countries had a secondary role. It also needs to be borne in mind that the press in Tsarist Russia and in the time of Kārlis Ulmanis was restricted by the regime, so questions relating to differences in political systems were rarely considered and addressed. Under Tsarist Russian censorship, newspapers were carefully examined and at least political news were coordinated according to the official regulations. Ulmanis' authoritarian regime was somewhat milder – there was after-print censorship, which in fact meant intervention by state authorities only in the case of violation of the rules after a newspaper was published.

### *The visit to Riga by Oscar II*

Oscar II, King of Sweden, arrived in Riga on 26 June 1875. The city was only a first, brief stop on the way to Moscow and St. Petersburg. The political significance of the king's short stay in the largest city of the Baltic should not be overestimated. However, in the nineteenth century Riga did not receive many visits by senior figures of foreign states.

Oscar II arrived in Riga on a Swedish warship, and was met at the mouth of the River Daugava (Düna) by a Russian warship, the *Dnepr*, which brought the royal guest to Riga. On his arrival at the embankment, the king was greeted by a company of honor from an infantry regiment stationed in Riga, the highest officials of the province, the Burgomaster of Riga, the head of the Swedish legation, the consul and vice-consul, as well as by residents of the city (whose number is not indicated by the papers). After the Swedish national anthem, or, as one newspaper wrote, a 'Swedish folk melody', the king paid a visit to the House of the Blackheads and attended a brief service at the Lutheran Cathedral. Already at 1 p.m., the king was at the railway station and continued on his route in a special carriage, proceeding to Daugavpils and Smolensk, with Moscow as the final destination. Judging from the information given in the papers, it seems that Rigans had arrived in large numbers to see the king.

In 1875, there were only 16 periodicals published in Latvian, of which we may exclude four supplements to the major papers and three publications that did not provide news. We are left with five newspapers that

provided new information in various fields. Three papers carried brief reports informing their readers of the king's impending visit, with more extensive coverage of the visit in the following issue. Authorship of these articles is unknown – according to tradition, names or even pseudonyms rarely appeared under the article. Thus all relevant publications about the visit are anonymous.

The most extensive overview of Oscar II's visit was provided by the conservative *Latviešu Avīzes*. Repeating information that appeared in the German newspaper *Rigasche Zeitung*, *Latviešu Avīzes* covered the course of the visit in detail. The officials whom the king met are listed, and the whole course of the event is described in detail. "In the hope that readers, particularly those living in the country" wished to know about the king's appearance, the paper also briefly portrays the royal personage. Thus, Oscar II is described as a middle-aged man with a short, black beard and a dark, very amiable visage. He is learned in a range of different fields, had himself written many works, was a poet, and a lover of the sea life.

Similar articles appeared on the front pages of all the Latvian language newspapers, although not as the most important news item of that day.<sup>4</sup> A slightly shorter article, but similar in content, was published by the liberal *Baltijas Vēstnesis*. However, in this publication the portrait of the king is even briefer: in addition to the mention of his parentage and age, it is stated that "in appearance he is a handsome person, with a graceful demeanour."<sup>5</sup> Although the paper *Baltijas Zemkopis*, published in Jelgava (Mitau) and popular among farmers, briefly informed its readers about the visit of Oscar II beforehand, there is no description of the king's visit in the next issue. We may assume that the editors considered the agricultural exhibition in Tallinn (Reval) and the anniversary celebrations of Jelgava high school (*Gymnasium*) as more important events.<sup>6</sup>

The description of Sweden in these articles is very meagre. Along with the brief and sympathetic portrait of the king's personality, *Latviešu Avīzes* emphasises that he is the ruler of the country "that provides us with herring, that staple food, and iron, that most useful metal".<sup>7</sup>

Some important aspects are missing from the newspaper accounts: there is no mention of the political context and aim of the king's visit, nor of the Swedish past of the province of Livland, and virtually no mention

<sup>4</sup> *Latviešu Avīzes*, 2 July 1875.

<sup>5</sup> *Baltijas Vēstnesis*, 2 July 1875.

<sup>6</sup> *Baltijas Zemkopis*, 25 June; 2 July 1875.

<sup>7</sup> *Latviešu Avīzes*, 2 July 1875.

of the presence of the public at the welcoming of the king, or of their opinion regarding the king.

### *Swedish neutrality in the First World War*

The beginning of the twentieth century brought qualitative and quantitative changes to the Latvian press. Industrialization and urbanization created pre-conditions for the fast development of Riga as a city. The number of population, educational, and cultural possibilities grew considerably, and it resulted in a more significant demand for information. A much greater number of newspapers were now being published. Up to 1905 slightly more than 50 newspapers were published in Latvian, but after 1905 the number of newspapers boomed and reached more than 300 newspapers by 1922. The year 1905 was certainly a turning point in the development of the free mass media for the Baltic provinces. Many publications about foreign countries were now original articles, written by Latvian current affairs writers and social activists. They covered an ever-wider range of subject matter – much was written about the domestic affairs of foreign countries and about international relations.

In the period from 1913 to 1917, more than 20 major articles were published in the various Latvian newspapers dealing specifically with issues relating to the foreign and domestic policy of Sweden (or of the Nordic countries and Sweden), and in all of these articles some attention was given to this country's stance in the event of war, or after the outbreak of war, i.e. concerning the question of whether it would maintain its neutrality. Although this is usually not pointed out, it is likely that most of the information given by the papers to their readers came from the major Russian newspapers, often adding the author's own assessment and conclusions (most authors still remained anonymous). In general overviews of European politics, the Nordic countries were rarely mentioned. Although all the publications gave considerable attention to international politics, they mainly dealt with the so-called European 'hot spots'. For example, in 1914, in an extensive foreign affairs overview of the neutral European countries in a major regional newspaper, *Liepājas Atbalss*, the Nordic countries are not covered at all: it is entirely devoted to the Balkans, Spain, and Portugal.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the impression comes across that the Nordic countries, including Sweden, were regarded as radically different, seemingly not directly connected to events in the rest of Europe.

<sup>8</sup> *Liepājas Atbalss*, 18 October 1914.

One of the central themes in articles on Sweden just before and during the war was Sweden's German orientation, both culturally and in foreign policy, along with the rumours about the "Russian threat" in Sweden. Even before the war, the papers reported that rumours about the threat from Russia were being spread in Sweden. In the spring of 1914, the papers wrote that Swedish and Norwegian conservative politicians and a "handful of chauvinists" were using tales about the Russian threat to arouse the people towards new sacrifices and to encourage parliament to provide additional funding for armaments.<sup>9</sup> One such anti-Russian campaigner was the famous Swedish geographer Sven Hedin, who in his letters from the frontline to Swedish newspapers had "unjustly criticised the Russian army." The paper *Latvija* called him a Jewish-German agent, asserting that he had no influence in Sweden.<sup>10</sup> Another article in the regional paper *Liepājas Atbalss* quotes a *Riksdag* deputy who emphasized Sweden's affiliation to the Germanic peoples and the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The author concludes that in the context of neutrality, an anti-Russian shift had occurred.<sup>11</sup> In publications from 1914 and 1915, we frequently find information about the activities of an anti-Russian group of professors in Sweden, about the debts of Swedish banks in Germany, and about trade with Germany under wartime conditions.

However, dominant in the papers overall, particularly from 1915 onwards, is the view that Sweden has no serious reason to join the German side. "Even if the Nordic peoples have closer ties of mental culture with Germany than with Russia, this should not be cause for concern. It is a long way from here to the transgression of neutrality and secret actions," concluded the author of an article in *Baltija*.<sup>12</sup> It was emphasised that for the Swedes neutrality is both economically and politically more advantageous than involvement in the war. Sweden comes across very clearly in the papers as having benefitted financially from the war, through trade with both of the warring sides. As the major newspaper *Dzimtenes Vēstnesis* wrote in 1916, "during this war, not all the citizens of the Scandinavian countries concern themselves solely with ideas of culture and love of humanity. There are not a few among them who are 'cashing in on the war'".<sup>13</sup>

In early 1914, information began to appear in the papers that Sweden, which had hitherto exercised restraint in terms of arming itself, was being

<sup>9</sup> *Jaunais Ceļš*, 8 April 1914.

<sup>10</sup> *Latvija*, 19 May 1915.

<sup>11</sup> *Liepājas Atbalss*, 4 January 1914.

<sup>12</sup> *Baltija*, 18 May 1916.

<sup>13</sup> *Dzimtenes Vēstnesis*, 1 September 1916.

dragged into the fever of war. The author of an article in *Jaunais Ceļš* considered a strong Sweden to be advantageous for Germany, and that Germany was promoting the military capability of this Scandinavian country.<sup>14</sup> Most authors explained Swedish arming in terms of German interests, but a couple of articles also emphasized the idea of “guarding their own isolation”. The Nordic countries have learned from bitter experience and wish to continue the peaceful work of culture in which they have already attained such a high level. The Scandinavian countries are small countries that wish to spend the war “in shelter”.<sup>15</sup>

The papers closely followed the development of cooperation among the Scandinavian countries. The conferences of the leaders of Sweden, Norway, and Denmark from summer 1914 onwards – developing a joint stance under the conditions where they were in danger from the war – were covered in considerable detail. The wording of some of the headlines even rushed ahead of events, talking about a Scandinavian union as an accomplished fact. The papers noted the unanimity of all three Scandinavian states in making the most important decisions. At the same time, the publications particularly emphasized Sweden’s role in this group of Scandinavian countries. Sweden is described as taking first place in Scandinavia, not only in terms of population and area, but also in terms of “political readiness”. In foreign affairs, too, the Swedes in particular were seen as setting Scandinavia’s course.<sup>16</sup> The paper *Jaunā Dienas Lapa* noted that King Gustav V had acquiesced to the people’s desire to strengthen ties with Norway and Denmark and so had set aside the old personal enmity in order to unite with the other Scandinavian countries. The paper concludes that the people of Sweden are convinced that their current political situation is “not like that of the Balkans”.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, the majority of articles, although focusing on the possibility of Sweden joining the war, also covered politics within the country. The readers are given hints about the nature of democracy in the Scandinavian countries: major opportunities for all sections of the population to take part in decision-making, the obligation of politicians to take into account public opinion, and openness in the administration. However, most of the information and opinion focuses on the foreign policy sympathies of the Swedes and the possibility of maintaining neutrality in the war.

<sup>14</sup> *Jaunais Ceļš*, 3 February 1914.

<sup>15</sup> *Liepājas Atbalss*, 17 January 1914.

<sup>16</sup> *Baltija*, 18 May 1916.

<sup>17</sup> *Jaunā Dienas Lapa*, 20 December 1914.

*Sweden's domestic politics in the interwar period: elections, politicians, and government action*

After Latvia obtained its independence, the press gained a new impulse. A large number of papers were published, and the central daily papers and regional papers, as well as the various party publications, all wrote extensively on international affairs and foreign states. Just to compare with the numbers of the pre-independence time: during the interwar period fewer than 2000 newspapers, magazines and bulletins were published. In contrast to the preceding period, we may note a significant quantitative and qualitative improvement in the content of papers. It is also important that increasing numbers of original articles appear, written by Latvian current affairs writers, as well as by Swedes.

In spite of the quantitative growth of the press, in the 1920s and 1930s information about Sweden's domestic affairs reached the Latvian reader irregularly. During elections, the papers generally provided brief information about which party had won and about the possibilities for cooperation with Sweden. Particular interest in Latvia was generated by the activities of Swedish adventurer Ivar Kreuger and his connection with Swedish politics. The third major group of publications may be characterized by their authorship: they were written by Latvian journalists or current affairs writers who had spent some time in Sweden and contributed news and their own assessment of political developments.

Analyzing several dozen articles, published mainly in the period 1921 to 1934, we can isolate a few central themes that dominated in accounts of Swedish domestic policy. In the context of Sweden's domestic affairs, Latvian newspapers of all political colors gave particular attention to the role of social democracy in that country. It should be mentioned at the outset that almost every review of political affairs in Sweden mentions the role of social democracy. After the elections of 1932, Latvian social democratic newspapers proudly displayed the headline "Red Sweden".<sup>18</sup> The paper *Sociāldemokrāts* noted that Sweden and Denmark were the only countries in Europe where social democrats had come to power by democratic means and were ruling without a coalition. It is noted that labor is highly organized in Sweden, with strong trade unions. The paper emphasized that Sweden and Denmark are countries with the "highest level of culture". An anonymous author wrote in this paper that in the crisis conditions many had made promises to the workers, "but the people, cool, clear-headed and

<sup>18</sup> See, e.g., *Strādnieku Avīze*, 23 December 1932; *Sociāldemokrāts*, 30 September 1932.

difficult to incite, but steadfast and strong-willed, did not let themselves be misled. It is no accident that social democracy has grown stronger in these countries than in others. This is proof that the rise to power of democratic social democracy is dependent on raising the level of culture of the working masses.”<sup>19</sup>

Considering the very hostile, even aggressive relationship between the Latvian social democrats and the political right, it is surprisingly hard to find in the Latvian nationalist papers any critical words about the left wing in Sweden. Even more than that, in 1933 a Latvian officer emphasized in a series of articles about the Nordic countries in the conservative army newspaper *Latvijas Kareivis* that the social democrats of Sweden had a concern for the defense of their country, with active participation by the left-wing government in the development of the country’s system of security.<sup>20</sup> In a subsequent article, the author noted that the social democrats, too, were beginning to understand that it is wrong to talk of militarism in those cases where it is a matter of strengthening the country’s defenses.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, the Latvian social democrats, who were continually striving for a reduction of the defense budget, had not long before gladly emphasized that austerity measures in Sweden would be introduced mainly at the expense of the military.<sup>22</sup>

Just as the Latvian nationalist press avoided being critical when writing on social democracy, so too the social democratic press was very restrained in its criticism when writing about the role of the king and of the monarchy in general in Sweden’s domestic affairs. “The Swedish aristocracy has always been more prescient than the ruling circles of other countries and has been able to adapt in good time to the course of development of its people. Accordingly, Sweden is long known as a democratic country and the level of welfare of its people quite high,” is the conclusion drawn in Latvia’s largest social democrat newspaper following the massive victory of the Social Democrats in the 1932 elections.<sup>23</sup>

Publications discussing the Finnish factor in Swedish politics also drew considerable interest in Latvia. Initially, there were many comments in the Latvian newspapers on the resignation of Sweden’s foreign minister Carl Hederstierna after announcements in the press of support for Sweden’s alliance with Finland in 1923. This was a time when there was still a serious

<sup>19</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 30 September 1932.

<sup>20</sup> *Latvijas Kareivis*, 28 October 1933.

<sup>21</sup> *Latvijas Kareivis*, 2 December 1933.

<sup>22</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 23 December 1932.

<sup>23</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 6 December 1932.

hope in Riga that Finland might join a League of Baltic states, and so every Finnish move closer to Stockholm was received with heightened attention. The nationalist paper *Latvis* noted that the Swedes had realistically and correctly perceived the situation when the Hederstierna's resignation was brought about. The author concluded that Finland had to stand together with the Baltic states, not with Sweden.<sup>24</sup> In later years, too, publications appear from time to time that consider Swedish-Finnish relations and how these are reflected in various developments in Finland.

Specifically Swedish political traditions come across very clearly in articles on the match industry magnate Ivar Kreuger, whose audacious business activities also extended to Latvia. The Swedish Prime Minister Carl Gustaf Ekman also became involved in an affair related to Kreuger: he had accepted a donation for his party from Kreuger, which he initially denied. Latvia's largest newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas* informed its readers in detail about the course of the investigation, concluding that "nobody among Ekman's party or government colleagues tried to save him or defend him".<sup>25</sup> Characteristic of these publications is the idea that regardless of the occurrence of such illegalities, the political milieu in Sweden does not permit them to spread, condemns them, and does not allow party ties to suppress such matters. Overall, Swedish domestic politics are characterized in the publications of the interwar years by an emphatically democratic spirit, openness, and mutual tolerance among parties. Latvian writers, even when describing negative developments in this country, mention the positive aspects of the country's overall development.

### *The visit of Gustav V to Riga*

The visit of King Gustav V to Latvia on 29 and 30 June 1929 was an event on a considerably different scale from the visit of Oscar II. In the first place, the king was coming to an independent country. Secondly, in May, preceding the king's visit, the Latvian president Gustavs Zemgals had visited Stockholm, thus heightening interest in Latvia about Sweden. The mode of the king's arrival in Latvia also differed: Gustav V visited first Estonia and then travelled by train to Riga. This visit was the most significant visit to Latvia by a foreign head of state during the interwar period. Not surprisingly, considerable resources were mobilized for the king's reception. During the two days of the visit, the public was well aware that there was

<sup>24</sup> *Latvis*, 21 November 1932.

<sup>25</sup> *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 10 August 1932, c.f.; *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 10 September 1932.

a king visiting the capital. On the day of his arrival, the king's route from the railway station right up to the University of Latvia building was lined with members of various organizations and enthusiastic welcomers. In the evening, the city and ships in the Daugava were lit up, while students and Scouts held torchlight processions. The next day, the king and the president received a military parade, visited the military cemetery and the seaside resort of Jūrmala, and held various receptions. Continuing his father's tradition, Gustav V also visited the Blackheads' House and the Cathedral, the symbol of Lutheranism. Overall, without exaggeration, we can say that people in Latvia had never before witnessed an official visit on such a scale and with so much pomp.

Analysis of the press coverage of the king's visit reveals three main approaches. Characteristically, the nationalist paper *Latvis* began writing about the king's visit already in early May, and from the middle of the month the paper carried articles connected with Sweden almost every day. Generally, the news directly relating to this event was placed on the first page, in the most visible location. Needless to say, on the actual days of the visit, practically the whole of the paper was taken up with news about the visit of this distinguished guest and about Sweden in general. In the course of two months, readers received a rich stock of information about Sweden. A slightly different approach was taken by the paper that had the largest readership in the country, the formally non-partisan but in reality centrist *Jaunākās Ziņas*. This paper carried far fewer articles, and these all relate directly to particular events, appearing a couple of days earlier. At the same time, the publishers of this popular newspaper devoted an issue of their equally popular weekly magazine *Atpūta* to Sweden. A third approach is represented by Latvia's largest left-wing, social democratic paper, *Sociāldemokrāts*. The Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party was opposed in principle to monarchs of all countries, and opposed to close ties with any capitalist country since these might be to the detriment of the Soviet Union. Thus, it came as no surprise that the social democratic press partly ignored the visit by the King of Sweden, and in June only five related articles appeared in this paper.

How were Sweden and the Swedes presented in these articles? And did Sweden "draw closer" to Latvia through the newspaper publications at the time of the visit? Analysis of the May and June issues of the newspapers provides clear answers to these questions. Because *Latvis* carried so many articles on Sweden, its readers were informed about a great many different spheres of Swedish life, from science to sport. Sweden and its people

are depicted in an extremely positive light. Arveds Bergs, the editor and owner of the paper and one of the country's most prominent politicians, describes the Swedes as "mighty and very humane", as "older cultural" people, asserting that "the whole of our people, all its classes without exception, have a love for Sweden".<sup>26</sup> Sweden's harsh natural setting "does not nurture a weak person, but rather brings up strong and hard-working people. To join hands with it and establish close cooperation and connections is our most heartfelt desire," states the editorial in *Latvis*.<sup>27</sup> Particular attention is given to historical issues, and several authors describe in expressive terms the historical links between the Latvians and Swedes in the past. We find "the good Swedish times" presented as an essential part of Latvian history. One article emphasizes that "[t]he peasantry of Vidzeme were under Swedish rule for only 110 years, but this age is one of the most positive in the history of the time of Latvian serfdom and corvée labour,"<sup>28</sup> that the Swedish kings, starting with Gustav Adolf, were "the true benefactors of the Latvian peasants," and that sympathy for the Swedes has been "quietly retained under the thatched roofs of Latvian homesteads, and only after the sun of Latvia's national independence has risen could it once again appear in the open and follow its former path."<sup>29</sup>

In the paper *Jaunākās Ziņas*, both the president's visit to Stockholm and the king's visit to Riga are described in great detail. However, there are relatively few articles on Sweden and the Swedes, and almost all of these were published in the actual days of Gustav V's visit. In these few articles, Sweden is likewise the subject of praise: it is emphasised that the Swedes are an ancient people of culture, that serfdom was abolished there already in the fourteenth century, and that democracy and freedom had always prevailed in that country. The legal expert Kārlis Dišlers notes in his article on Sweden that the country does not take part in the major politics of Europe, but instead devotes its attention to "developing culture at home". Like other authors, he emphasizes Sweden's achievements in science, technology, literature, and art.<sup>30</sup> The Swedish king's visit itself likewise took place in an unequivocally positive atmosphere: the paper published a dedication by poet Jānis Akuraters entitled "Silhouettes of Sweden" and an editorial

<sup>26</sup> *Latvis*, 29 June 1929.

<sup>27</sup> *Latvis*, 19 May 1929.

<sup>28</sup> *Latvis*, 25 May 1929.

<sup>29</sup> *Latvis*, 19 May 1929.

<sup>30</sup> *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 16 May 1929.

by the well-known writer, with the telling title and greeting to the king “The light of history”.<sup>31</sup>

Even before the visit, *Sociāldemokrāts* published a statement that the Social Democrats did not wish to “denigrate the official representative of the people and state of Sweden, but the Social Democrats are not going to take part in celebrations involving all kinds of tricks conjured up by our bourgeoisie.”<sup>32</sup> In this paper, the comments on monarchies in general are negative, emphasising that “the time of kings is past.”<sup>33</sup> The few publications describe with irony the king’s welcomers in Latvia and Estonia, and criticise the lavish expense. However, no direct attack on the King of Sweden is to be found in the pages of *Sociāldemokrāts*. Quite the opposite, it is pointed out that the king is more accustomed to social democrats than his ‘royal welcomers’ – the Latvian bourgeoisie.<sup>34</sup> In the 30 June issue of the paper, the visit is covered succinctly, with neutrality towards the Swedish guest, but markedly critical towards the local figures of power.

However, the forecasts in the papers about the development of closer cooperation between Latvia and Sweden are markedly more reticent than one might expect, given the exalted descriptions of the country. 1929 was a year when even Finland ceased to be counted among the Baltic States by many of the most passionate supporters of a border state policy.<sup>35</sup> Virtually nobody in Latvia had any illusions that the visit by the King of Sweden could lead to major changes in foreign policy. Because of this, newspaper journalists followed with even greater interest a variety of indications and hints. As one reporter noted, the king’s train trip from Tallinn to Riga through the Vidzeme region, a former dominion of Sweden, “can be regarded as most significant.”<sup>36</sup> *Latvis* cited articles in the foreign press that reflected the visit and analyzed its significance. Separate articles portrayed Sweden as the leading country of the Baltic region, with interests on both shores of the Baltic Sea. Characteristically, an article in an Austrian magazine describing Sweden as a “natural leader of a defence pact with Finland, Estonia, and

<sup>31</sup> *Jaunākās Ziņas* 29 June 1929.

<sup>32</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 27 June 1929.

<sup>33</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 29 June 1929.

<sup>34</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 27 June 1929.

<sup>35</sup> The border state policy viewed Soviet neighbours, former parts of Russian Empire, as the buffer states between Communist Soviet Union and the West and this policy generally aimed at the preservation of the status quo in Europe. Border state policy meant that these small states – Finland, Baltic States, Poland, and Romania should actively cooperate among themselves in order to reach their foreign policy goals but this in fact did not materialize.

<sup>36</sup> *Latvis*, 7 June 1929.

Latvia,” and stating that “perhaps now the idea of a league of Scandinavian states will re-emerge” caught the attention of *Latvis*.<sup>37</sup> A. Bergs wrote more specifically about possible political, cultural, and economic rapprochement. Not being naïve as a politician, he concedes that the visit would not have immediate results, but would “establish for ourselves” and “demonstrate to the outside world that the Baltic States have a mutual understanding and cooperation.” It may be thought that to some degree the stance taken by A. Bergs was stimulated by the sometimes exaggerated positive reports from the Head of the Latvian Legation in Stockholm.<sup>38</sup>

Compared to *Latvis*, the centrist *Jaunākās Ziņas* emphasised political rapprochement to a much lesser degree and in a more muted tone. Characteristically, following the many impressive photographs published already after 1 July, the next issues of the paper contain no more information about the king’s visit or its reflection in the foreign press. *Jaunākās Ziņas* wrote practically nothing about the possible political consequences of the visit, while the opinion expressed in *Sociāldemokrāts* was that this event could not have any political effects.<sup>39</sup>

### *Sweden’s neutrality in the second half of the 1930s*

From 1934, Latvia was under an authoritarian regime, and the press had very restricted opportunities to publish information differing from the official position. The number of newspapers had decreased (in 1935, for instance, 74 periodicals were closed for various reasons), and the whole of the press connected with political parties had gone out of existence. In this period overall, relatively few newspaper articles covered the political affairs of Sweden. A significant exception in this regard was the period of the late 1930s, particularly 1937 and 1938, when attention was paid to the question of the neutrality of the Nordic countries, analyzing Sweden’s stance on this question from various viewpoints. It should also be noted that the

<sup>37</sup> *Latvis*, 14 July 1929.

<sup>38</sup> For example, on 19 February 1929 the head of the legation Kārlis Zariņš reported on the great interest in Swedish society about Latvia: “The most serious and prominent representatives of the press are turning to the legation with the suggestion that we continually provide them with information about Latvia, mainly about cultural and economic issues, of course, and in such a way as we ourselves wish.” Latvian State Historical Archive [Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs], 2574. f., 3. apr., 705. l., 32. lp. After the visit by King Gustav V, Zariņš reported to the foreign minister on 1 June 1929 that “Everyone is speaking positively of Latvia and emphasising Latvian-Swedish rapprochement.” (*Ibid.*, 103. lp.).

<sup>39</sup> *Sociāldemokrāts*, 4 June 1929.

most energetic advocates of Latvian-Swedish and Latvian-Nordic unity came from a restricted circle of intellectuals, academics, and politicians.<sup>40</sup>

A central question dominating the publications on Sweden from this period was the policy of neutrality. The question in relation to the Nordic countries was whether a policy of neutrality would be the best course for small states to take. The diminishing importance of the League of Nations was widely described, citing the position of Sweden. Sweden's minister of foreign affairs Rickard Sandler was widely quoted in 1937 when he described the "creation of neutrality principles" in the Nordic countries. Sandler, as underlined in the biggest Latvian newspaper *Jaunākās Ziņas*, placed emphasis on active Swedish participation in the League of Nations, acting only in accordance with a policy of neutrality, opposing any strife between the great powers. He also mentions the "absolute unwillingness to enter into an engagement that might create difficulties" for Stockholm's policy.<sup>41</sup> Underlined text from Sandler's speech characterizes Latvia's official attitude towards collective security – it is necessary to make provisions for freedom of action in the future, even if this contradicts the general principles of the League of Nations. Nordic criticism of this institution continued to appear in publications very often, and Nordic activities in Geneva are described in detail. In 1938, Swedish delegate in Geneva, Bo Östen Undén, is cited in newspapers as doubting the practical implementation of the most important paragraph – Article 16 – of the League's treaty,<sup>42</sup> while another newspaper put an impressive title to a similar publication: "The 'Black Day' in Geneva."<sup>43</sup>

Publications also included an account of how Sweden intended to defend its neutrality. From 1937 onwards, there are an increasing number of articles describing Sweden's armament policy: budgetary spending for the army at a previously unseen level was explained in terms of Stockholm's determination to defend its neutrality.<sup>44</sup> In 1937, another article explaining defence and neutrality issues appeared in a newspaper, under the headline "Nordic states constitute a separate superpower". The idea was that close

<sup>40</sup> C.f.: Valters Ščerbinskis, "Looking for neighbours: origins and developments of Latvian rhetoric on Nordic 'closeness'", *Post-Cold War identity politics: northern and Baltic experiences*, ed. by Marko Lehti and David J. Smith (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), 157–173.

<sup>41</sup> *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 29 April 1937.

<sup>42</sup> *Rīts*, 1 February 1938. Article 16 stipulated harsh action against unprovoked aggression and support to the victim state.

<sup>43</sup> *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 1 February 1938.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, one of the few articles written by a Latvian journalist: K. Ieviņš, "Dzelžainais pavasaris" [The iron spring], *Jaunākās Ziņas*, 18 May 1938.

Nordic cooperation, especially in the economic sphere, might secure the existence of those states in critical times.<sup>45</sup>

However, very little was published regarding the direct comparison of Latvian foreign policy and Swedish neutrality. Even the seemingly significant visit in 1937 of the Swedish minister of foreign affairs Rickard Sandler passed by almost unnoticed and without comment in the printed mass media. In an interview with Latvian journalists while visiting Kaunas, the then-capital of neighboring Lithuania, Sandler came up with the traditional complimentary phrases: the Swedes had long felt deep sympathy towards the Latvians and the Baltic Sea served as a unifying factor. What was really important for the Latvian reader was Sweden's attitude towards the new system of treaties, but Sandler's answer was the usual one: both Latvia and Sweden were supporters of the League of Nations and both (sic!) countries adhered to neutrality.<sup>46</sup>

The Latvian mass media carefully followed any indications as to the possibility of Baltic and Swedish (Nordic) cooperation. In this light, it is very clear why the newspaper *Rīts* devoted so much space to a lengthy summary of an article published originally in a French business journal. This expressed that the Baltic States were in theory implementing an identical neutrality policy to that of the Nordic countries, while the practical implementation differed. Finnish neutrality had German leanings, while Sweden, despite earlier being a strict opponent of the armament policy, was now arming herself, Norwegian neutrality was adjusted to trade and shipping, and Baltic (including Latvian) neutrality was characterized by a strong alliance between all three Baltic states. Additional obstacles for potential German aggression might be created through the extension of "Nordic neutrality policy to the Baltic states", concluded the author of the French publication.<sup>47</sup> Baltic aspirations towards *rapprochement* with the Nordic countries also received attention in Germany. Thus, a critical summary of a publication in *Berliner Börsen Zeitung* revealed Baltic efforts for closer political and economic cooperation with Scandinavia within the framework of neutrality.<sup>48</sup>

Neutral Sweden was seen in the Latvian mass media as a small country willing to cooperate with the neighboring countries as closely as possible. Non-alignment with any political bloc was regarded as a Swedish

<sup>45</sup> *Brīvā Zeme*, 23 March 1937.

<sup>46</sup> *Brīvā Zeme*, 8 June 1937.

<sup>47</sup> *Rīts*, 11 December 1937.

<sup>48</sup> *Brīvā Zeme*, 9 June 1937.

choice, but at the same time they assumed that the existence of bilateral or multilateral alliances would not cast doubt on the self-declared principles of neutrality. Facing the diminishing role of the League of Nations, Sweden chose to defend itself. Although the abandonment of the previously accepted principles of collective security – first of all, Sweden’s view that article 16 of the League of Nation’s treaty was optional – might have been interpreted negatively, Sweden instead kept its positive image, and the Swedish principles of neutrality were described as rational, pragmatic, and exemplary for Latvia. The Latvian mass media cautiously followed any signs signalling a change in Swedish foreign policy and possible *rap-prochement* with the Baltic.

### *Conclusions*

In different periods, along with the development of the Latvian press, the quantity and content of articles on Sweden changed considerably. In the descriptions of Oscar II’s visit in 1875, the image of Sweden is very ill-defined and is hard to discern from the content of the publications. The reaction to the visit by Gustav V more than 50 years later differs cardinally, providing extensive and diverse information. Overall, looking at this long period, we may conclude that Sweden obtained considerable publicity in the Latvian press, although comparatively less than the neighboring countries or the great European powers.

Already in the period up to 1917, the political image of Sweden incorporated certain particularly significant elements: their neutrality, monarchy, and democratic system. The Latvian press viewed Swedish neutrality as a logical, well-founded choice. The monarchy and democracy were understood as cornerstones of Swedish statehood. Already at the time of the visit by Oscar II, a very positive image of the king dominated in the press, leaving the description of Sweden itself in the background.

There was something of a turning point in the country’s political image during the time of independent Latvia. By that time, the press was mostly presenting a much more diverse picture of developments. Overall, in the 1920s and 1930s, Sweden’s political image in Latvia retained its previous emphases. However, there are certain differences in terms of how events were reflected, a consequence of the development of democratic conditions in Latvia. Within the broad spectrum of political publications, the role of parliament and political parties in the country was presented from somewhat different angles. In the social democratic press, particularly after the

Social Democrats' electoral success, Sweden came across as a markedly social democratic, even "red", country. At the same time, right-wing publications emphasized Sweden's role in the cultural history of the region and Swedish culture as an example for the Latvians, to some degree playing down the Social Democrats' success in Sweden. As a result, the image created by the left in Latvia did not include any particularly negative traits. For example, during the course of the 1929 royal visit and even before that, the monarchy was described in a very restrained manner, but with a degree of respect uncharacteristic of the Latvian Social Democrats. The right-wing publications, for their part, recognized with satisfaction that in Sweden even the Social Democrats gave serious attention to issues of national defense.

In the second half of the 1930s, Swedish domestic policy issues receded into the background in the Latvian press. In the publications of the early twentieth century, the question of Swedish neutrality was frequently analyzed in the light of factors relating to Swedish culture and history, but in the second half of the 1930s the relations between countries and international organizations predominated and the factors of culture, mentality, and ethnic kinship became irrelevant. In both cases, for the Latvian press Sweden was the most influential Nordic country, determining to a large degree the tone of neutrality policy at a regional level.

How is Sweden viewed within the Nordic context? The Nordic countries only started to appear in the papers as a united political group at the eve of the First World War. Although kinship in terms of culture, history, and language had always served as a unifying factor, the publications often reveal disagreements among these countries. During the First World War, a Latvian reader could have obtained the impression that the interests of Sweden differed markedly from those of Norway and Denmark. However, the leading role of Sweden in the Nordic group was always emphasized. It has to be admitted that the group of Nordic countries certainly had a smaller role in the Latvian press than the separate image of Sweden (or Finland). Prior to Latvia's independence, there was virtually no mention of parallels and common episodes in Latvian and Swedish history, culture, or politics. Later, in the 1920s and 1930s, the common history, Protestant culture, and geopolitical stability encouraged current affairs writers to identify a link with Sweden. Newspapers of various, sometimes of even politically opposite, natures remained generally positive regarding different aspects of life in Sweden. Swedish political life had far less critical remark from the Latvian observers than any other countries. Sometimes it was directly related to the Protestantism, which was an obvious connective element for

the whole of Northern Europe in many general articles. Often more general articles contained references to the common past and how good the old Swedish times were compared to other centuries in Latvian history.

The Nordic countries were mainly discussed within the frame of international politics. Norway and Denmark remained relatively unfamiliar to Latvians – in the absence of economic, historical, or political pre-conditions – and these countries quite evidently had little interest in Latvia.

The construction of the political image of Sweden in the press also tells us about the identity of the Latvians themselves. The newspapers of the Tsarist period write about the “little country of Sweden”, while in the texts of the 1920s and 1930s there is frequently mention of “Sweden as a great power”. From the perspective of the Russian Empire, Sweden and its political influence were small. From the perspective of independent Latvia, Sweden could be regarded as a great power within the Baltic Sea region, and generally also viewed by Latvians in political terms as an example to follow.

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### KOKKUVÕTE: *Neutraliteet, demokraatia ja kuningad: Rootsi poliitiline kuvand Läti ajakirjanduses enne Teist maailmasõda*

Läti suhetel Põhjamaadega on ühise geograafilise piirkonna tõttu pikk ajalugu. Olgugi et neil kahel riigil oli mitmeid eeldusi sarnaseks arenguks (eelkõige protestantism), liikus Läti ühiskond erineva poliitilise režiimi tõttu siiski teises suunas. 19. sajandil moodustasid praeguse Läti alad osa Vene impeeriumist ja said demokraatliku riigikorra alles pärast iseseisvumist 1918. aastal. 1934. aastal kehtestati aga Lätis autoritaarne režiim ja see kehtis kuni Nõukogude anneksioonini 1940. aastal. Samal ajal aga jäi Rootsi sõdadest ja revolutsioonidest puutumata ja riik sai areneda demokraatlikes tingimustest. Läti ajakirjanduses 19. sajandi lõpust kuni Teise maailmasõjani Rootsi kohta ilmunud artiklitest võib lisaks avaliku arvamuse suhtumisele Rootsi riigi poliitikasse leida nii mõndagi informatiivset ka lätlase enesehinnangu ning identiteedi kohta.

Rootslaste majanduslik edu ja poliitiline stabiilsus olid positiivses mõttes erilised mitte ainult Baltimaade, vaid kogu Euroopa kontekstis. Juba enne 1917. aastat olid Rootsi poliitilisele kuvandile omased kindlad tunnused nagu neutraliteet, monarhia, demokraatia. Läti press nägi Rootsi neutraliteeti kui loogilist ja hästipõhjendatud valikut. Monarhiat ja demokraatiat peeti aga Rootsi riikluse „nurgakivideks“.

1875. aastal asetleidnud Oskar II visiidi ajal Läti ajakirjanduses ilmunud artiklist on väga keeruline selget Rootsi-kuvandit välja lugeda, kuna domineeris väga positiivne suhtumine Oskar II isikusse, jättes hinnangu Rootsi riigile tervikuna tahaplaanile. Esimese maailmasõja aastatel kasvas Rootsi-teemaliste artiklite arv oluliselt ja neis vaadeldi peamiselt Rootsi valitud neutraliteeti ja sellest tulenevat positsiooni sõjas. Selle perioodi artiklid olid ilmselt suures osas pärit Vene ajalehtedest ning lisatud oli mõnikord vaid autori enda arvamus ja järeldused. Järgneval perioodil, alates Läti riigi iseseisvumisest kuni vaikiva ajastu saabumiseni 1934. aastal, kajastati peamiselt ikka Rootsi välispoliitilisi suhteid, sisepoliitilised küsimused jõudsid läti lugejani ebaregulaarselt. Kõige enam tähelepanu pälvisid Rootsi sotsiaaldemokraadid, pärast nende valmisedu 1932. aastal nimetati Rootsit sotsiaaldemokraatlikuks või isegi „punaseks“ riigiks. Samal ajal rõhutasid parempoolsed Läti erakonnad Rootsi olulist rolli kogu Läänemere-regiooni kultuuriajaloos, jättes mõnevõrra tahtlikult märkimata sotsiaaldemokraatide edu Rootsis. Selle tulemusena ei sisaldanud Läti vasakpoolsete poolt loodud Rootsi-kuvand ühtegi selgelt negatiivset joont. Näiteks 1929. aastal asetleidnud Gustav V visiidi ajal ja ka enne seda kirjeldati monarhiat väga vaoshoitud moel ja läti sotsiaaldemokraatidele mitte-omase lugupidamisega. 1934. aastal alanud autoritaarse režiimi tingimustes oli pressil keeruline väljendada valitsusriingkonnast erinevat arvamust ning nii nagu üldiselt väljaannete arv, kahanes ka Rootsi-teemaliste artiklite hulk märkimisväärselt. Kui 20. sajandi varastes kirjutistes analüüsiti Rootsi neutraliteeti tihti ajalooliste ja kultuuriliste faktorite valguses, siis 1930. aastate teises pooles valitses rahvusvaheliste suhete temaatika ning kultuuri, vaimsuse ja etnilise suguluse teemad muutusid väheoluliseks.

Teise maailmasõja eelõhtul ilmusid taas vaatluse alla Rootsi välispoliitilised suhted, võeti seisukohti Rootsi jätkuva neutraliteedi suhtes ning arutati, milliste vahenditega kavatses Rootsi seda neutraliteeti kaitsta.

Kuidas vaadeldi aga Rootsit Põhjala kontekstis? Põhjamaad ilmusid ajalehtedesse ühendatud poliitilise grupina alles Esimese maailmasõja eelõhtul. Kuigi sugulus kultuuri, ajaloo ja keelte tasemel oli alati olnud ühendavaks faktoriks, paljastavad kirjutised sageli erimeelsusi nende maade

vahel. Esimese maailmasõja ajal tekkis läti lugejal arvatavasti mulje, et Rootsi huvid lahknesid märkimisväärselt Norra ja Taani omadest. Norra ja Taani jäid lätlastele võõraks, kuna puudusid majanduslikud, ajaloolised või poliitilised sidemed ja ilmselgelt need maad ei tundunud huvi ka Läti vastu. Pidevalt rõhutati Rootsi juhtivat rolli Põhjamaade hulgas .

Rootsi poliitilise kuvandi loomisel ajakirjanduse poolt võib leida palju viiteid ka lätlaste enda identiteedile. Vene tsaaririigi perioodi kirjutavad Läti ajalehed „väikesest maast Rootsist“, samas kui 1920. ja 1930. aastate kirjutised käsitlevad Rootsit kui suure mõjujõuga riiki. Vene impeeriumi perspektiivist oligi Rootsi ja selle mõju väike. Iseseisva Läti seisukohalt vaadeldi Rootsit kui Läänemere regiooni suurjõudu ning olulist poliitilist eeskuju.