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Leena Malkki

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We Have All Been Warned: Public Debate on the Capitol Attack in Finland and Sweden

Leena Malkki

Centre for European Studies, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

The Capitol attack has provoked intensive debate and reflection far beyond the United States. These debates and their repercussions will be part of the legacy of the event. The article looks at the public debate on the Capitol attack in Finland and Sweden. In both countries, the Capitol attack was interpreted as a warning about the powerful consequences of sowing distrust towards democracy. The attack may inspire far-right actors to attempt to shake the democratic system in these countries too. Whether such mobilisation could succeed and gain support from within the political system seems unlikely, but not entirely impossible.

KEYWORDS

Far right; Finland; Sweden; democracy; polarisation; Capitol attack; right-wing populist parties

What happened on Capitol Hill on 6 January 2021 was not just an American news story. From the moment the news broke about the crowd approaching the Congress, the events were closely followed in Europe with a mix of shock, disbelief, and in some corners, excitement. Even though the mobilisation of Trump's supporters was hardly surprising, it was still considered very disconcerting. The EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell was one among many to state that "this is not America" and characterise the event as an assault on U.S. democracy.¹ That this could happen in one of the oldest democracies in the world seemed to indicate that it could happen anywhere.

One recurring feature of the European debates on the Capitol attack has been whether a similar incident could, indeed, happen here. In each country, the interpretation of the events has been coloured by ongoing domestic political debates. These discussions and their repercussions will also be a part of the history and legacy of the Capitol attack. While the full story is yet to unfold, initial reactions are telling and worth analysing in their own right. They bear testimony to the growing concerns about the future of democracy and the development of far-right politics in Europe.

To illustrate these concerns, this article looks at the public debate on the Capitol attack in Finland and Sweden, two Northern European countries that rank at or near the top by virtually all metrics of democracy, stability and the rule of law. Despite their track record, the answer to the "could it happen here" question was far from a confident no.

What made the Capitol attack significant in the eyes of most Finnish and Swedish observers was not the event itself, however dramatic or unprecedented it may have been. It was what had happened before it that mattered most. The event was, above all, interpreted as testimony to the powerful consequences that words may have and a warning about how sowing distrust towards democracy may gravely endanger it. This was not only a concern for the U.S. The same kind of conspiracy theories and online political culture that had inspired those who broke into the Capitol were present in Sweden and Finland as well.

Discussion on the events in the U.S. intertwined with long-standing concerns about hate speech on social media, especially in Finland. Verbal attacks against public figures seemed to have become so

common that they affected people's willingness to participate in political debate and run for office. "Who would become involved in politics if the prize is to get threatened and trashed on social media," as one commentator put it.² What further aggravated these concerns was that the former Prime Minister Juha Sipilä was physically attacked by a passer-by (at least seemingly co-incidentally) just a few days after the Capitol attack.

Words also played a major role in discussions on who was to blame for what had happened in the U.S. Many Nordic commentators pointed their finger towards those who spread misinformation and incited rioting. This meant President Trump in particular, but also Republican politicians who had supported him and repeated the claims about election fraud. One oft-voiced concern was that the event might inspire right-wing populists elsewhere and present a model on how to go about dissolving a democracy. Many politicians in Sweden and Finland (alongside other countries) tend to look towards the U.S. when developing their political strategies and campaigning.

The debate about the Capitol attack also quickly evolved into a debate about the role of populist right-wing parties in domestic politics. During the 2010s, these parties gained significant political ground in both Finland and Sweden. In early 2021, the Finns Party polled at 21.9 percent, thereby being the largest party in Finland,³ while the Sweden Democrats were the third largest party in Sweden with 18.5 percent of support.⁴

In Finland, connections between national politics and the Capitol attack were mostly established implicitly, while in Sweden the attack quickly and explicitly became a part of domestic political disputes on how to deal with the Sweden Democrats. The party has its roots in Sweden's far-right circles but has since moderated its views. It gained its first parliamentary seats in 2010. So far, other parties have refused to cooperate with it. In recent years, the right-wing Moderate party has begun to float the idea of breaking this policy of *cordon sanitaire* and forming a government with the Christian Democrats, relying on the support of Sweden Democrats after the next parliamentary election in 2022.⁵

Soon after the Capitol attack, especially the leading social democrats of Sweden began to use it as a means to push back on these plans. They blamed the moderates for endangering Swedish democracy by naively thinking they could "ride the beast" and use the support of Sweden Democrats for their own purposes. Similar concerns were voiced by other parties and political commentators who continued to argue that the Sweden Democrats cannot be trusted to act responsibly if they are brought to power.⁶

Warnings about threats to democracy were, however, also voiced by the Finns Party and even more strongly by the Sweden Democrats. Both claimed that it was not their party that was the problem. For the Sweden Democrats, the problem was the hateful and polarising rhetoric against it. If this kind of polarisation goes on, party leader Jimmie Åkesson warned, Sweden might indeed find itself in a situation where public trust in institutions had eroded and thereby also trust in elections.⁷ For the Finns Party, the danger lay in the way in which large technology companies had allegedly endangered freedom of speech by closing the social media accounts of nationalist or conservative politicians and political commentators.⁸

How well-founded were these concerns about the future of Nordic democracy? Not everyone agreed that something like the Capitol attack could happen in Finland or Sweden, at least not in the near future. Even if many similar developments could be identified on both sides of the Atlantic, it was repeatedly noted that there were also significant differences. Political polarisation and the divisiveness of American society was seen as one major condition that made the Capitol attack possible. Even though it was generally believed that Swedish and Finnish societies had become increasingly divided and polarised, most agreed that political polarisation had not reached the same level as in the U.S.

This view is supported by research. According to recent studies, political polarisation in Finland and Sweden has not, in fact, increased nearly as much as commonly thought. In Sweden, there is polarisation concerning issues related to culture and values, which traditionally have not been a source of conflict, but overall, political polarization is not considered a systemic threat.⁹ In Finland, there is some movement towards the political extremes, but the majority of the population and candidates in political elections are still close to the political centre.¹⁰ Furthermore, both countries have a multi-party system

with strong traditions of consensus, which is likely to hinder excessive polarisation. It is worth noting that while far-right ideas such as the Great Replacement and Deep State have, indeed, found their way into the Nordic countries, the QAnon theory has hitherto failed to gain a significant foothold.

At the same time, however, the popular image of Finland and Sweden as stable welfare states with strong traditions of consensual politics may hide the fact that both countries also have a history of far-right extremism. The concerns about the future of democracy discussed above were not merely motivated by recent developments but also by national history, especially in Finland.

It would have been difficult for Finnish politicians to claim that something like the Capitol attack could not happen in Finland when, in fact, it already had. The tumultuous inter-war years that followed the bloody Finnish Civil War (1918) saw intense political strife between the bourgeoisie and working-class parties and movements. Among these movements was the far-right Lapua Movement which (among many other things) attempted to pressure the government twice by arranging a march to Helsinki. The first so-called Peasant March in 1930 brought thousands of people to Helsinki and went largely peacefully. Plans for a second march were only halted after the Finnish President Svinhufvud intervened and told the Lapua Movement activists to abandon them.¹¹ While the antagonism of the interwar years dissipated during the decades that followed, it has not become irrelevant or forgotten.

Sweden, for its part, has had an active far-right milieu since the early 20th century. Nazi sympathisers never witnessed the same kind of post-war countermeasures and condemnation as in many other parts of Europe. While the electoral success of far-right parties has been limited, extraparliamentary activities and far-right subcultures have been rather vibrant. Swedish groups have also had significant transnational connections for decades.¹²

Far-right activities in both countries have also involved political violence. Sweden in particular has witnessed several far-right attacks in recent decades.¹³ Both the Swedish Security Service (SÄPO) and the Finnish Security and Intelligence Service (SUPO) have recently communicated that the threat of far-right political violence has increased.¹⁴

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that not all far-right extremists think that violent attacks are a suitable way forward right now. In fact, the Nordic Resistance Movement, the most notable neo-Nazi organisation in the region, has restrained its use of violence because it has deemed it counter-productive and has rather focused on advancing its political views through various legal channels, including participation in local politics in Sweden.¹⁵ The NRM has not been alone in this. As Jacob Ravndal has recently argued, the far right in western countries has during recent decades increasingly turned from violence towards metapolitics, in other words, trying to influence cultural and intellectual domains and thereby pave the way for the revolutionary struggle in the future.¹⁶

Even if violent tendencies exist within the Nordic far right, the Capitol attack may rather feed into the long-standing metapolitical dreams within the milieu. What happened on January 6 was, after all, that many such people showed up who did not consider themselves revolutionaries, walked together to the Congress and made the world's most powerful country tremble for a while.¹⁷ Nordic far-right extremists have not so far been very public about their thoughts on the event. It would be surprising if none of them have wondered whether and how they could shake the democratic system in their own country.

Whether such mobilisation could succeed and gain support also from within the political system is far from certain. Considering the connections that the Finnish and Swedish populist right-wing parties have with the extraparliamentary far right, and the occasionally lenient attitude towards violence that they have exhibited, it is difficult to provide a confident, resounding “never” as answer.

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Notes on contributor

Dr. Leena Malkki is a historian and political scientist specialised in the study of terrorism and political violence in western countries. She is currently a University lecturer at the Centre for European Studies, University of Helsinki.

Notes

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