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Skilful Leaders or Dictators? The Image of the Hegemons of State of the Baltic Countries Conveyed by The Finnish Media in the Interwar Period

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Abstract

There were three persons above the others when evaluating their importance and fame in the political life of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania during the interwar period. Antanas Smetona became the authoritarian leader of Lithuania in 1926. Konstantin Päts rose to the same position in Estonia in the spring of 1934, and Kārlis Ulmanis did the same in Latvia a couple of months after Päts. All three held supreme power until the summer of 1940, when they were ousted by the Soviet occupation regime.

The Finnish media followed the development of events in the Baltic countries with interest. The greatest interest was in Estonia, which was geographically and especially culturally closest to Finland, but Latvia and Lithuania also received a fair amount of attention. The attitude towards the politics of these three hegemons was largely, but not entirely determined by the Finnish newspapers' own ideological backgrounds. Although the administrations of Smetona, Päts, and Ulmanis may have seemed almost identical during their "authoritarian regimes," contemporaries saw significantly more differences in the hegemons' content and tone in retrospect.

Rezumat

Au existat trei persoane se ridică deasupra celorlalte atunci când se evaluează importanța și faima lor în viața politică a Estoniei, Letoniei și Lituaniei în perioada interbelică. Antanas Smetona a devenit liderul autoritar al Lituaniei în 1926. Konstantin Päts a ajuns în aceeași poziție în Estonia în primăvara anului 1934, iar Kārlis Ulmanis a făcut același lucru în Letonia câteva luni mai târziu. Toți trei au deținut puterea supremă până în vara anului 1940, când au fost înlăturați de regimul de ocupație sovietic.

Mass-media finlandeză a urmărit cu interes dezvoltarea evenimentelor din țările baltice. Cel mai mare interes a fost pentru Estonia, care era geografic și, mai ales, cultural mai apropiată de Finlanda, dar și Letonia și Lituania au primit o atenție considerabilă. Atitudinea față de politica celor trei hegemoni politici a fost în mare parte, dar nu în totalitate, determinată de fundalul ideologic al ziarelor finlandeze. Deși administrațiile lui Smetona, Päts și Ulmanis ar fi putut părea aproape identice în timpul „regimurilor lor autoritare", contemporanii au văzut semnificative diferențe în conținutul și tonul acestora în retrospectivă.

Keywords: Media history, political history, Konstantin Päts, Kārlis Ulmanis, Antanas Smetona
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Introduction

The media is a significant influencer of opinion; therefore, the media also plays a significant role in international relations. As a part of the world view in general, perceptions of the leaders of other countries can guide how other countries are seen as a whole. A leader, especially an authoritarian one, can act as a symbol of the entire state when things are viewed from outside the country.[1] We may thus argue that the image created by the Finnish press regarding the heads of state of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania is related to broader contexts and relations between the countries, and does not only concern the mentioned leaders as individuals.

This article analyses what kind of image the Finnish media conveyed to their readership about the authoritarian leaders of the Baltic countries, and why the image was of a certain kind. Media principally refers to newspapers and magazines in this context, but other types of media, such as schoolbooks and encyclopaedias, also have been taken into account as a point of comparison. In this research, the digitised archive of the National Library of Finland has been used, through which the relevant material was found using search words "Päts", "Ulmanis", and "Smetona".[2] From the hits obtained in this way, the most important texts in terms of the chosen topic have been screened, in which a position has been taken on the activities of the *hegemons* in question or on them as individuals.

The quantitative analysis shows that most of these writings that took a clear position appeared immediately after the given leaders had taken power. The peak of writing subsequently occurred for a period of one to two weeks. Writings that took a position also appeared to a lesser extent when

[1] Manfred Beller, "Perception, image, imagology", in *Imagology. The cultural construction and literary representation of national characters. A critical survey*. Ed. by Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 4–11; Olavi K. Fält, "Introduction", in Kari Alenius, Olavi K. Fält & Seija Jalagin (Eds.), *Looking at the Other. Historical Study of Images in Theory and Practise* (Oulu: Oulu University Press, 2002), 8–11; David Ratz, "The Study of Historical Images". *Faravid* 31/2007, 218.

[2] *Kansalliskirjasto*, https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/etusivu?set_language=en

Päts, Ulmanis, and Smetona made other major political decisions or were re-elected president.[3]

The qualitative analysis applied in this article is based on historical source criticism that emphasises contextualization. Moreover, the most important aspects of media research and image analysis have been utilised as complementary perspectives to source criticism. These include, e.g., the media's general operating methods, and the tendency for mental images to be stereotyped and quite unchanged, unless the circumstances change significantly.[4] The subject area is almost unexplored. The author of this article has published an article (2022) that gives an overview of the Finnish media's image of Latvia in the interwar period.[5] In addition, Anne Hänninen's unpublished master's thesis (1995) deals with the writing of the Finnish political press about Konstantin Päts in the 1930s.[6]

Antanas Smetona – The great man of Lithuania

Antanas Smetona seized power with the support of the Lithuanian army in December 1926. The reason given by Smetona and his associates was that the Lithuanian government had endangered Lithuanian independence by being too lenient with the Bolsheviks, and giving into Polish imperialist aspirations towards Lithuania.[7] While the Finnish media brought up these arguments, they did not take a position on them. Possibly, it was because there was too little information; besides, the accusations were quite general,

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[3] "Newspapers", "Magazines", "Päts", "Ulmanis", "Smetona", "01.01.1926 – 31.12.1939", *Kansalliskirjasto*, https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/etusivu?set_language=en (accessed 25.08.2022).

[4] Fält 2002, 9–10; Ratz 2007, 202–203.

[5] Kari Alenius, " Under oppression to national prosperity – The image of Latvia in the Finnish media in the interwar period", in *Perspectives on Latvian-Finnish Relations in the Early 20th Century. Näkökulmia latvialais-suomalaisiin suhteisiin 1900-luvun alkuvuosikymmeninä*. Studia Historica Septentrionalia 84. Kari Alenius & Valters Ščerbinskis (Eds.) (Rovaniemi: PSHY, 2021), 89–114.

[6] Anne Hänninen, *Vanha demokraatti diktatuurin tiellä. Konstantin Pätsin toiminta Virossa vuosina. 1931-1940 Suomen poliittisen lehdistön kuvaamana*. Poliittinen historia, pro gradu -tutkielma (Turku: Turun yliopisto, 1995).

[7] V. Stanley Vardys & Judith B. Sedaitis, *Lithuania: The Rebel Nation*. Westview Series on the Post-Soviet Republics (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 34–36.

so it was difficult to prove them true or false. The event crossed the news threshold in all Finnish newspapers. Small provincial newspapers brought the matter up in their news sections, and mainly quoted larger Finnish newspapers and the news material sent to them by the Finnish Information Agency, without taking a stand on the matter themselves.[8] Short comments appeared in the larger Finnish newspapers, which revealed the editors' attitude towards Smetona as a person, and towards the situation in Lithuania in general.

The coup seems to have come as a surprise to all Finnish newspapers, which raised some concern during the first few days about how the situation would develop in the future.[9] As no violence broke out in Lithuania, life seemed to return almost to the way it was very quickly, and the worries eased. In the leftist and liberal non-socialist newspapers, the coup and the move away from the democratic system was nevertheless considered undesirable. The first reactions of the left-wing newspapers immediately spoke of a transition to a dictatorship,[10] and the social-democratic newspaper *Työn Voima* speculated that the coup would make Lithuania an unstable and disreputable "Balkan country".[11]

It is likely that the disappointment of the Finnish left was deepened by the fact that Smetona had ousted a left-wing government in Lithuania. It was thus easy to declare the new order a dictatorship, even though there was still no definite information about the characteristics of the administration. The Balkans, for its part, had been stigmatised as a general term that could be used to mean any kind of political instability and strife[12]. In any case, the content of the term was strongly negative, and reflected the emotional

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[8] "Wallankaappaus Liettuassa". *Etelä-Savo* 18.12.1926; "Presidentin vaihdos Liettuassa". *Kauppalehti* 20.12.1926; "Statskuppen in Litauen". *Wiborgs Nyheter* 20.12.1926.

[9] "Högeromvälvning i Kaunas". *Hufvudstadsbladet* 18.12.1926; "Ulkomailta". *Iltalehti* 18.12.1926.

[10] "Liettuan fascistit kaapanneet wallan eilistä wastaan yöllä". *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 18.12.1926; "Fascistiskt kuppspektakel i Litauen". *Arbetarbladet* 20.12.1926.

[11] "Fascismi uhkaa". *Työn Ääni* 20.12.1926.

[12] Robert W. Pringle, "Balkanization", *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Balkanization (accessed 30.08.2022).

upheaval that was felt among the Finnish left about the turn of events in Lithuania when the first news arrived.

Finland's largest newspaper, the liberal right-wing *Helsingin Sanomat*, also interpreted in its first news report that a "fascist coup" that followed the example of Italy and Poland had taken place in Lithuania.[13] The *Sanacja* movement, which seized power in Poland under Marshal Pilsudski, was not actually fascist or dictatorial, nor was Marshal Pilsudski a fascist or dictator.[14] It may be that *Helsingin Sanomat* used those terms only to inform the readers that something similar to what happened in Italy in 1922 had happened in Poland in the spring of 1926, and in Lithuania at the end of the same year. In that sense, conservative right-wing governments with its many nuances probably fitted under the term "fascism" in the 1920s.

In general, anachronistic interpretations must be avoided when interpreting the tones of writing. As the political commentators of the interwar period couldn't have yet experienced the direction in which fascist movements developed by the Second World War - especially in Germany with National Socialism - fascism was not associated with greatly negative tones until after the Second World War. In the same way, dictatorship was neutrally described as an "alternative to democracy" in Finnish school books during the 1930s, which had gained wide support in many European countries.[15] Parliamentary democracy based on universal and equal (including women) suffrage was a relatively young phenomenon, and many were not yet convinced of its functionality.

It is noteworthy and perhaps characteristic due to the given background that *Helsingin Sanomat* also showed an understanding of the situation in Lithuania, and the key factor in that was specifically the personality of Antanas Smetona. *Helsingin Sanomat* reported that Smetona was a well-respected politician who had great achievements in the fight for Lithuania's independence, and as a stabiliser of the country's political life in

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[13] "Fascistinen vallankaappaus Liettuassa". *Helsingin Sanomat* 18.12.1926.

[14] Norman Davies, *Im Herzen Europas. Geschichte Polens* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006), 114; Michel Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 363.

[15] Oskari Mantere & Gunnar Sarva, *Keskikoulun yleinen historia II* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1936), 336; K. O. Lindeqvist, *Uuden ajan historian oppikirja* (Porvoo: WSOY, 1939), 310–311.

the early 1920s. The paper's conclusion was that "since Smetona had been included in the coup project, there must have been widespread dissatisfaction in Lithuania with the country's left-wing government".[16]

For the liberal centre, the left was a political competitor, so the non-leftists' rise to power in Lithuania could appear to be a positive phenomenon in principle. The conservatives were also rivals of the liberals, but the sharper dividing line was between the left and the non-left. That is why the author of the *Helsingin Sanomat* article was willing to look for mitigating circumstances, even though the nature of the change of power, a coup, raised concerns. The term "stabiliser" used for Smetona possibly contained a reference to the fact that the extreme left had not come to power in Lithuania in the previous years. Beyond that, it probably referred to a general desire to return to "normal life" after a long period of instability. The First World War, and the subsequent civil wars and wars of independence in Eastern Europe until 1923, had undoubtedly been a shocking experience for almost everyone.[17]

Finland's conservative newspapers agreed with the latter interpretation of Helsingin Sanomat. The conservative press did not condemn the coup, but contented themself with reporting it neutrally.[18] Viewed from the perspective of Finnish conservatives, defeating a left-wing government and ignoring the rules of parliamentarism to achieve it clearly did not seem like very serious things. It must be remembered that there was a civil war in Finland in the spring of 1918, in which the Finnish extreme left had tried to oust the national right-wing government through an armed coup. Repelling the coup attempt led to a war that lasted three and a half months, in which more than 37,000 Finns died.[19]

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[16] "Fascistinen vallankaappaus Liettuassa". *Helsingin Sanomat* 18.12.1926.

[17] See, for instance, Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).

[18] "Sotilasvallankaappaus Liettuassa". *Karjala* 18.12.1926; "Liettuassa on tapahtunut sotilasvallankaappaus perjantain vastaisena yönä". *Uusi Suomi* 18.12.1926.

[19] Osmo Jussila, Seppo Hentilä & Jukka Nevakivi, *From Grand Duchy to a Modern State. A Political History of Finland since 1809* (London: Hurst & Co, 1999), 110–111; Henrik Meinander, *A History of Finland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 129.

In the 1920s, Finnish conservatives were dissatisfied with the fact that immediately after the war, the left had been given the opportunity to continue its normal political activities. Even the communists were allowed to participate in the parliamentary elections, although not openly under the name of the communist party but through covert organisations. Finnish conservatives therefore felt that Finland's political system was still under threat. They feared a possible new rebellion attempt by the extreme left with the support of the Soviet Union, and felt that the work of the Finnish "Whites" during the Finnish civil war to fight Bolshevism was not appreciated enough.[20] Because of that, Smetona's actions in Lithuania could seem quite desirable, although it was not said directly. The open opposition to parliamentarism might have damaged the Conservatives' reputation among the broad electorate.

If Smetona was characterised as a person and a politician, then the reviews were positive: they emphasised Smetona's moderation, and the fact that he was appreciated even by many who did not necessarily agree with him on the contents of politics.[21] It can be estimated that the reactions of the conservative press also reflected their ideal of what the political order should have been like in Finland. Conservatives accepted parliamentarism, but in their opinion, the best option would have been a parliamentary monarchy where the king had a lot of power. Immediately after the Finnish civil war, conservatives wanted such an ideal to be realised in Finland. Because Germany had supported the Finnish national government in the civil war, a German prince was wanted as king. It was also believed to ensure Germany's support for Finland in the future against the threat of the Soviet Union and Bolshevism. In October 1918, Prince Friedrich Karl of Hesse was elected King of Finland, but Germany's defeat in the First World War prevented the project from being realised. Friedrich Karl renounced the

[20] Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi 1999, 143–146; Meinander 2013, 134.

[21] "Ulkomaat. Liettuassa tapahtunut vallankaappaus". *Karjala* 19.12.1926; "Sotilasvallankaappaus Liettuassa". *Suursavolainen* 20.12.1926; "Joutuuko Liettua kansalaissodan pyörteisiin?". *Perä-Pohja* 21.12.1926.

crown, and Finland had to reorientate its foreign policy in the direction of the winning powers.[22]

In the summer of 1919, a constitution was created in Finland, which confirmed its parliamentary democracy. However, the constitution was a kind of compromise between the monarchists and the republicans because the president of Finland was given quite extensive powers in the constitution.[23] It can therefore be estimated that Smetona's actions seemed acceptable to Finnish conservatives even against this background: a strong head of state had taken necessary measures to move extremists aside, and to secure social stability in the country.

The fact that Smetona was said to be a person who was respected across party lines fits very well with the above-mentioned viewpoint. Finnish conservatives wanted to see the president, and before that, the king, as a leader who was above party-political disputes and united the entire nation.[24] Smetona could very well have been like that in Lithuania as well, but the world view and political ideals of Finnish conservatives in any case explain why it was very natural for conservatives to present Smetona in that light.

The measures taken by Smetona during the next couple of years, by which he strengthened his position as the leader of Lithuania, did not attract much attention in Finland. The next time Smetona and his role came to the Finnish media in a significant way was in December 1931, when he was re-elected as president of Lithuania. It is obvious that the development of the previous years in Lithuania had by then convinced the Finnish media that there was no particular great concern. Although parliamentary democracy had been limited, Lithuania had not become the kind of dictatorial state that persecuted the citizens of its own country or behaved aggressively in its

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[22] Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi 1999, 121–125; Meinander 2013, 130.

[23] *Suomen Hallitusmuoto* [Constitution] 17.07.1919, https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/alkup/1919/19190094001 (accessed 31.08.2022). See also Meinander 2013, 130.

[24] Vesa Vares, *Kuninkaan tekijät: Suomalainen monarkia 1917–1919. Myytti ja todellisuus* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1998), 64–78.

foreign policy. This was thought to be largely credited to Smetona, who had enjoyed popular support in Lithuania.[25]

Practically all the Finnish newspapers brought out the fact that the 116-member electoral assembly had unanimously elected Smetana as president[26], and even the left-wing newspapers did not criticise the election method or the operation of Smetona's administration in general. In the left-wing newspapers, the comments were short, and they did not take a strong position on the issue.[27] Although Smetona and his politics were not in line with the ideals of the Finnish left, the development of Lithuania was apparently not very worrying for the left. Lithuania probably did not matter much from the viewpoint of the left either, so for them, the election of Smetona as president was only a matter belonging to the short foreign news section.

Centrist and conservative newspapers, in particular, created a clear hero image of Smetona: his long and varied career in the service of the Lithuanian state was presented in detail, and several newspapers stated that Smetona was the most important and respected great man in the modern history of Lithuania.[28] The conservative press had been somewhat cautious in the situation of 1926, when it was not yet clear what Smetona's use of power and the operation of his administration as a whole would turn out to be. It is obvious that during the next five years, Finnish conservatives became convinced that things in Lithuania had gone in a good direction. There was nothing to criticise about Lithuania's political life, even though the recent

[25] "Presidentinvaali Liettuassa". *Helsingin Sanomat* 12.12.1931; "Smetona enhälligt återvald". *Hufvudstadsbladet* 12.12.1931.

[26] "Smetona Liettuan presidentiksi". *Uusi Aura* 14.12.1931; "Smetona har omvalts till Litauens president". *Björneborgs Tidning* 15.12.1931; "Liettuan presidentti". *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* 15.12.1931; "Presidentinvaali Liettuassa". *Itä-Savo* 15.12.1931; "Smetona Liettuan presidentiksi yksimielisesti". *Karjalainen* 15.12.1931.

[27] Smetona Liettuan presidentiksi". *Kansan Työ* 12.12.1931; "Liettuan presidentiksi valittu Smetona kolmannen kerran". *Työn Voima* 14.12.1931.

[28] "Smetona Liettuan presidentiksi yksimielisesti". *Suomenmaa* 12.12.1931; "Presidentinvaali Liettuassa". *Keskisuomalainen* 13.12.1931; "Smetona Liettuan presidentiksi". *Liitto* 15.12.1931.

history of Lithuania was not presented in detail in connection with the news.[29]

The admiration of conservative writers was aimed specifically at President Smetona. It seems that he was seen as a leader in line with conservative ideals, and in principle, Smetona could have served as a role model for Finns themselves. This conclusion was not directly stated, but based on the very positive comments, such a statement could logically have been made.

It is possible that the positive attitude was influenced by Finland's own development in the years of 1930-1931. In Finland, the political atmosphere had clearly changed in the direction where support for right-wing values had grown. The conservatives won, and the left was the biggest loser in the parliamentary elections of 1930. In 1931, the strongly conservative Pehr Evind Svinhufvud was elected president of Finland in place of the moderate centrist Lauri Kristian Relander, who was president from 1925 to 1931.[30]

Svinhufvud's long career as a statesman and independence fighter was very similar to Smetona's, and it may be that some Finnish writers had associated them in their minds. Svinhufvud was a hero of the conservatives and some of them were ready to offer him the position of an authoritarian leader in 1932, when there was an internal political crisis in Finland. Finnish right-wing radicals then demanded tougher measures to defeat communism and limit the activities of left-wing ideology. At the same time, they considered it necessary to limit parliamentarism as well, and even planned an armed rebellion if their demands were not met. Svinhufvud refused, and it was largely thanks to him that the crisis subsided.[31] In any case, the fact that some Finnish conservatives would have wanted an authoritarian leader in their own country explains why Smetona was seen as a hero of Lithuania in the Finnish conservative press.

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[29] "A. Smetona taas Liettuan presidentiksi". *Karjala* 12.12.1931; "Veräjältä". *Vaasa* 14.12.1931.
[30] Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi 1999, 152–161.
[31] Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi 1999, 161–163; Meinander 2013, 134–136.

The same admiration as it was in 1931, and even stronger, was repeated in December 1938, when Smetona was elected president for the third time. The difference between the Finnish left-wing and right-wing newspapers was exactly the same as it was seven years earlier, so there had been no changes in attitudes during the 1930s. The left-wing newspapers briefly stated that Smetona's popularity was high, but the comments were otherwise short and neutral.[32] In the writings of the conservatives, Smetona was once again presented as a great man of Lithuania's modern history and generally in a very positive light.[33]

Varying reviews of Konstantin Päts, and Kārlis Ulmanis as "bringer of order"

Head of State (*riigivanem*) Konstantin Päts, together with his most important supporter General Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of the Estonian Armed Forces, carried out their coup in Estonia in March 1934, and Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis in Latvia in May 1934.[34] The attitude of the Finnish media toward both coups in the spring of 1934 and their leaders was very similar, and also resembled the attitude regarding Smetona's coup seven years earlier.

The majority of Finnish newspapers showed a very far-reaching understanding of Päts and Ulmanis and their arguments. There was a wider and more detailed discussion about the reasons for the coups in comparison to the events in Lithuania. Päts announced that exceptional measures were necessary in order to prevent a coup and transition to a fascist dictatorship planned by Estonia's far-right party, known as the Union of Estonian Freedom Fighters (the country's largest party). Ulmanis, for his part, appealed to the fact that Latvia was threatened by a coup d'état from both

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[32] "Liettuan uudelleen valittu presidentti Smetona". *Kansan Lehti* 13.12.1938; "Liettuan hallitus". *Kansan Voima* 13.12.1938.

[33] "Liettua". *Itsenäinen Suomi* 7-8/1934; "Liettua juhlimassa presidenttiään". *Hakkapeliitta* 25.9.1934; "Liettuan kansan johtaja Antanas Smetona". *Suomen Sotilas* 1.2.1935; "Antanas Smetona – Det litauiska folkets landsfader". *Soldatgossen* 1.5.1935.

[34] Andres Kasekamp, *Baltian historia* (Tampere: Vastapaino, 2013), 155–157.

the extreme right and the extreme left.[35] Scholars differ on how real or acute these coup threats were, and a position on that debate is not taken in this article. The most important consideration in terms of the actual theme is that the arguments made public by Päts and Ulmanis were widely believed in the Finnish press.

The events in Finland and Germany from the previous couple of years probably had an effect in the background, although they were not directly referred to in the newspaper articles in connection with Estonia and Latvia. In March 1932, the Finnish extreme right-wing Lapua Movement, which admired Italian fascism, had made an unsuccessful coup attempt, as referred to in the above connection with presidents Smetona and Svinhufvud. It convinced many Finns that democracy was under threat even in their own country, and the threat could come from the extreme right as well as the extreme left. The National Socialists' rise to power in Germany took place in January 1933, along with the country's subsequent development towards a violent dictatorship, which was also an alarming sign for many, and a major setback in terms of the development of parliamentary democracy in Europe.[36]

In the case of Estonia, the political situation was simpler than in Latvia and Lithuania, which was also reflected in the attitude of the Finnish media. Since the alleged threat came from the extreme right, the Finnish left, centre, and liberal right wings considered Päts' measures to be correct. Several newspapers assured in almost identical wordings that "there was no reason to doubt that Päts and Laidoner would not have taken measures in the interest of their own country and people, with a sincere mind".[37] This reflected, on the one hand, that it was difficult to get an accurate picture of the events in Estonia, and one had to rely on what Estonian and foreign news

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[35] Ibidem; Jordan Tyler Kuck, *The Dictator without a Uniform: Kārlis Ulmanis, Agrarian Nationalism, Transnational Fascism, and Interwar Latvia* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee, 2014), 240; Marin Vallikivi, *The Consolidation of Power: Konstantin Päts taking and securing his power after the coup d'etat in 1934* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2019), 38–41.

[36] Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi 1999, 168; Meinander 2013, 136.

[37] "Yllätyksellistä". *Ilta-Sanomat* 13.3.1934; "Asiasta toiseen". *Aamulehti* 14.3.1934; "Sisäpoliittinen tilanne Eestissä". *Keskisuomalainen* 14.3.1934.

agencies reported. On the other hand, and above all, it also spoke of great trust in Päts and Laidoner. Thirdly, the Finnish media mainstream was inclined to believe that the extreme right was a serious threat to the democratic system, and very strong means were necessary to combat the threat.

In the spring of 1934, the clear majority of the Finnish media did not interpret the matter as declaring a state of emergency and centralising power to one authoritarian leader – Päts or Ulmanis – would have been a threat to democracy. On the contrary, Päts' actions particularly were seen as a defence of democracy. This especially applied to the first reactions immediately after Päts' actions.[38] During the next couple of weeks, the writings of the Finnish left-wing and liberal newspapers became more nuanced - and they included more criticism, albeit mild. Päts' measures were against normal parliamentarism, although they could still be considered a type of the right to self-defence. Left-wing and liberal newspapers expressed that they hoped Estonia would return to normal life as soon as possible.[39] The state of emergency and Päts' special powers were accepted for the time being, but the authors clearly expected that he should not go down the "path of dictatorship" and show respect for democratic values.

The matter aroused strong emotions among the Finnish press. For instance, the liberal right-wing sharply criticised the Finnish conservative right-wing, whose newspapers[40] expressed doubts about whether the threat of coup was real. Liberal and left-wing newspapers were convinced of the threat posed by the extreme right, and they did not want to believe that anti-parliamentarian actions could arise from what was considered a moderate party. Päts was considered a solid democrat in Finland, which was based on

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[38] "Viron tapahtumat". *Helsingin Sanomat* 14.3.1934; "Viron tapahtumat". *Maakansa* 14.3.1934; "Viron hallituksen perusteelliset ja voimakkaat varmuustoimenpiteet pelastivat valtakunnan". *Pohjolan Sanomat* 14.3.1934. See also Hänninen 1995, 26–31.

[39] "Maktkampen i Estland". *Hufvudstadsbladet* 15.3.1934; "Näkötornista". *Etelä-Savo* 17.3.1934; "Tuoksinasta temmattuja". Savo 22.3.1934.

[40] "Mikä on totuus?". *Vaasa* 13.3.1934; "Viron tapahtumat". *Kajaani* 15.3.1934; "Eesti julistettu suojelutilaan". *Lahti* 15.3.1934.

his previous political activity[41]. Therefore, conservative and far-right interpretations clearly irritated liberals and leftists, and generated criticism against these political rivals.

The conservative *Uusi Suomi* was of the opinion that it could also have been a political game, with which Päts tried to remove his main opponent from the arena, keeping the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections in mind.[42] The conservatives seemed slightly unsure of how to react to Päts' actions. On the one hand, they shared common values with Päts, because he also represented right-wing conservatism. On the other hand, the Estonian Freedom Fighters' Union's proposal for a new Estonian constitution included reforms that many Finnish conservatives considered justified. The purpose of the new constitution was to create a strong president in Estonia, who would have extensive powers. When Prime Minister Päts declared a state of emergency in Estonia, he effectively prevented the enforcement of the new constitution, and postponed both the presidential and parliamentary elections to an indeterminable date in the future. From the point of view of Finnish conservatives, it was a setback that could also be important for Finland. The enforcement of the new constitution in Estonia could have served as an example, on the basis of which the president's power in Finland could have been further increased.

The Finnish extreme right was the only one that strongly criticised Päts.[43] The *Ajan Suunta* newspaper condemned Päts' actions as a coup d'état, and reciprocated by ironically criticising the left, the centre, and the liberal right for the fact that these "defenders of democracy" were now not interested in Päts' anti-democratic actions. In the counter-narrative of the *Ajan Suunta* newspaper, it was pointed out that the Union of Freedom Fighters had been the overwhelming favourite in the upcoming

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[41] "Vironkin tapahtumiin on Suomessa suhtauduttava intohimottomasti". *Häme* 14.3.1934; "Muut lehdet". *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 14.3.1934; "Pilkaisuja". *Turunmaa* 14.3.1934.

[42] "Viron suojelustilaan julistaminen osoittautuu vanhojen puolueiden vaalitaistelukeinoksi". *Uusi Suomi* 14.3.1934. See also Hänninen 1995, 32–35.

[43] "Vallankaappauskoe Eestissä". *Ajan Suunta* 13.3.1934; "Diktatuuri vaalitaistelukeinona". *Kymenlaakson Suunta* 15.3.1934; "Tuntemattoman Tuomaan tarinoita". *Karjalan Suunta* 16.3.1934. See also Hänninen 1995, 35–36.

parliamentary elections, and that the Freedom Fighters' proposal for a new constitution had clearly won the referendum. According to *Ajan Suunta*, Päts had prevented the realisation of the freely expressed will of the people.[44] The sharp tone of the paper is also explained by the fact that the background group of the paper, the radical right-wing *Isänmaallinen Kansanliike* party, had been in close cooperation with the Union of Estonian Freedom Fighters.[45]

Konstantin Päts' future actions in Estonia in the second half of the 1930s did not significantly change the attitude of the Finnish press towards him. Opinions were divided in the same way as in the spring of 1934. When a new constitution was adopted in Estonia in the summer of 1937, the reform was received in a cautiously positive manner, but there were also criticisms. In the opinion of the left and liberals, the reform was in the right direction towards returning to parliamentarism, but it was insufficient as such. Even after the reform, Päts was able to continue as an almost exclusive "strong leader". Päts' way of governing was called dictatorial, but he himself was not usually called a dictator.[46] This was probably intended to make a difference compared to Italy and Germany, where the position of the head of state and the only allowed party was clearly stronger and the politics were more aggressive.

The attitude of the Finnish press towards the 1934 Ulmanis coup was structurally quite similar. The Finnish media mainstream easily believed that it was another threat to democracy caused by extremists, which justified harsh countermeasures.[47] The fragmentation of Latvian politics was used as a new argument to defend Ulmanis: Latvia's political system had been "too

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[44] "Susi lammasten vaatteissa". *Ajan Suunta* 19.3.1934.

[45] Mikko Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta – Isänmaallinen Kansanliike 1932–1944* (Helsinki: Otava, 1982), 294–313.

[46] "Viron työväenliike eheytyy". *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 11.7.1937; "Viron hallitusmuoto". *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat* 3.8.1937; "Viron uusi valtiosääntö". *Länsi-Savo* 3.8.1937; "Palaako Eesti demokratiaan?". *Suomen Pienviljelijä* 5.8.1937; "Valtionhoitajaksi ryhtynyt hra Päts". *Ajan Suunta* 18.8.1937. See also Hänninen 1995, 59–69.

[47] "Sotilaskaappaus uhkasi Latviaa". *Etelä-Saimaa* 17.5.1934; "Diktatur i Lettland". *Hufvudstadsbladet* 17.5.1934; "Latvia julistettu suojelustilaan". *Keskisuomalainen* 17.5.1934.

democratic to function effectively"[48]. It was true that Latvia was an extreme example in this respect. There were 100 seats in the parliament, which were usually divided between almost 30 different parties. It made it difficult to reconcile the different interests and goals of the parties, and weakened the ability of the parliament and the government to make decisions effectively. The position of the head of state was formal in the same way as in Estonia, and differed considerably from the situation in Finland.[49]

Finland's largest liberal newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, summarised its position on 22 May 1934 as follows: "Excessive democracy inevitably led to revision" and "a turning point in Latvia means a return to the Finnish line".[50] According to the strong mainstream of the Finnish media, it was good that Latvia now, like Finland, had a strong president, and that the number and power of parties had been reduced. Critical comments were published only in the newspapers of the Finnish left – that is, among the most important group, against whom Ulmanis had declared a state of emergency[51]. Ulmanis stated that he had also prevented a far-right coup, but the Finnish far right ignored that aspect. A positive note from the Finnish far right was that Ulmanis pursued national goals and acted resolutely against the left in Latvia.[52]

Conclusions

On the one hand, one could find very critical assessments in the Finnish press, but on the other hand, many newspapers and magazines showed considerable understanding towards the *hegemons*' political measures. Some of the newspapers and magazines also analysed the positive and negative sides, while others avoided taking a stand on the issues and were content to only report the facts. It can be thus concluded that the image

[48] "Suojelustila Latviassakin". *Aamulehti* 17.5.1934; "Latvian tapahtumat". *Karjala* 17.5.1934; "Latvian tapahtumat". *Haminan Lehti* 19.5.1934.
[49] Kasekamp 2013, 151–153.
[50] "Käänne Latviassa merkitsee paluuta 'suomalaiselle linjalle'". *Helsingin Sanomat* 22.5.1934.
[51] Vallankaappaus Latviassa". *Eteenpäin* 17.5.1934; "Talonpoikaispuolueen vallankaappaus Latviassa". *Suomen Sosialidemokraatti* 17.5.1934; "Latviassakin on nyt voimassa vain yhden puolueen diktatuuri". *Kansan Lehti* 18.5.1934.
[52] "Toiset viisastuvat kokemattakin". *Ajan Suunta* 23.5.1934.

of the Baltic *hegemons* conveyed to the Finnish readership was mosaic-like, and far from one-dimensional interpretations during the interwar period.

Nevertheless, it seems obvious that the authoritarian leaders of the three Baltic countries were seen in a rather positive light in the Finnish media mainstream. These *hegemons* did not look like dictators and enemies of democracy, but more like skilled state leaders who had to use hard means to defeat political extremists under difficult circumstances. Criticism against Päts, Ulmanis, and Smetona was rare, and was (in most cases) given only if the *hegemons* in question attacked supporters of the ideology that a Finnish newspaper supported in Finland. The *hegemons* of the Baltic countries relied on the conservative rural population. It was logical that the newspapers of the same population group in Finland were the biggest admirers of Päts, Ulmanis, and Smetona: to them, these three appeared as heroes, great men of history, and saviours of their fatherland.

The left and the liberals were the most critical, but even from their side, the criticism was quite moderate. Estonia's authoritarian leader Päts received the most criticism, which could be due to the fact that Estonia was better known in Finland than Latvia and Lithuania, and Estonia was considered the most similar to Finland. Therefore, those who strongly supported parliamentary democracy in Finland were disappointed that things turned out differently in Estonia. It is possible that Latvia and Lithuania were mentally equated more with the countries of Eastern Central Europe, where undemocratic governance was more the rule than the exception in the period between the world wars. The transition to an authoritarian regime was therefore not as surprising to Finnish observers.

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