

## **Global Capitalism Meets National Spirit: Discourses in Media Texts on a Cross-Border Acquisition**

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## **Abstract**

Mergers and acquisitions are particularly timely and revealing examples of contemporary restructuring – embedded in the language of global capitalism – that is shaping organizational fields and national economies. However, we still know little of how international mergers and acquisitions are discursively constructed. There is especially little critical reflection of the discursive elements that legitimate international mergers and acquisitions.

In this paper, we focus on the acquisition of the Norwegian Christiania Bank og Kreditkassen by Nordea, a corporation consisting of Swedish, Finnish and Danish financial services companies. This case was characterized by long and versatile coverage in the Norwegian media after the acquisition intentions were announced in the fall of 1999 until the final acquisition in October 2000. We carry out a critical discourse analysis (see e.g. Fairclough, 1997) of Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish media texts (the leading newspaper, the leading tabloid, the leading business weekly, and the leading business daily). We place the acquisition within the context of the development of Nordea which began with the merger of the Finnish Merita Bank and the Swedish Nordbanken in the autumn of 1997, and continued with the merger of MeritaNordbanken with the Danish Unidanmark in the spring of 2000 (see Vaara and Tienari, forthcoming; Risberg et al, 2000).

Our analysis shows how a ‘rationalistic’ discourse dominates discussions around foreign acquisitions. However, the study also illustrates how a ‘nationalistic’ discourse can challenge the rationale of global industrial restructuring. The ‘nationalistic’ discourse appears to follow the logic of ‘banal nationalism’ in that the companies in question are easily associated with “national interests”. However, a more in-depth analysis of the emerging ‘nationalism’ reveals significant differences in the ‘nationalism’ of different countries. What is most interesting is that the case clearly shows is that the ‘nationalistic’ discourse is built on relationship-specific social identification. The most obvious and important example of this is the Norwegian-Swedish relationship, having its historical roots in the Swedish colonization of Norway. It appears very clear that the Norwegian nationalism grew strong and sharp when the acquiring corporation was taken to be Swedish.

Our analysis also suggests that the acquiring (or colonizing) side easily justifies the actions within the ‘rationalistic’ framework while the acquired (or colonized) side may revert to a ‘nationalistic’ discourse. Thus the ‘nationalistic’ discourse can become a vehicle of change resistance. However, as this case very clearly shows, it is in the end very difficult to overcome the forces driving towards global industrial restructuring, legitimated by the dominant ‘rationalistic’ discourse.

## **1. Introduction**

Mergers and acquisitions are particularly timely and revealing examples of contemporary restructuring – embedded in the language of global capitalism – that is shaping organizational fields and national economies. In the dominant business discourse and rhetoric, mergers and acquisitions are justified and legitimized as necessary and/or unavoidable. This is done, for example, in the name of creating benefits from economies of scale and scope, synergistic combination of units, functions and processes, focus on core competencies, and transfer of capabilities and knowledge. Mergers and acquisitions are portrayed within a ‘rationalistic’ discursive framework as strategic moves that are vital for the companies to remain competitive – and/or to survive (see e.g. Vaara and Tienari, forthcoming).

Cross-border acquisitions encourage conceptions of difference/distinctiveness and uniqueness in media texts. Further, acquisitions across national boundaries are often considered within a framework of winning and losing – where it typically becomes ‘natural’ to identify national ‘sides’. Acquisitions can thus be seen as manifestations of underlying cognitive and emotional interpretations of the historical relationships between the respective nations and nationalism (see e.g. Anderson, 1983; De Cillia et al, 1999). This can be linked with themes such as national heritage, superiority and inferiority, and/or post-colonialization (Risberg, Tienari and Vaara, 2000). It seems, however, that the nature and characteristics of ‘nationalistic’ discourse has been rarely explicitly elaborated on in the merger or acquisition context. Especially little is known of its relation to the apparently dominant ‘rationalistic’ discourse of global capitalism.

We suggest that the ongoing ‘transformation’ within financial services in Europe provides a particularly important and timely context for critical research on media texts. As employees who are made redundant or consumers whose habits and preferences become subject to change, people experience the ‘real’ consequences of this turmoil. Financial services companies are key actors in the ongoing project of the new global order; they benefit from it and work to extend it (Fairclough 2000).

In the emergent cross-border merger and acquisition activity in financial services in Europe, *Nordea* – the new group name for a major Nordic corporation – may be considered a significant forerunner. The bank group now includes a Swedish, Finnish, Danish and a Norwegian financial services company. In this paper, we examine the process of acquiring the Norwegian Christiania Bank og Kreditkassen in the group. The initial offer for the acquisition was made in September 1999 and the acquisition deal signed in October 2000. We analyze texts in Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish written media to illustrate and specify how global capitalism, as a discourse relying on economic and financial rationale, exemplified here by *Nordea*’s attempts to expand, meets national spirit.

Our analysis shows how a ‘rationalistic’ discourse dominates discussions around foreign acquisitions. However, the study also illustrates how a ‘nationalistic’ discourse can challenge the rationale of global industrial restructuring. The ‘nationalistic’ discourse appears to follow the logic of ‘banal nationalism’ in that the companies in question are easily associated with Norwegian, Swedish or Finnish “national interests”. However, a more in-depth analysis of the emerging ‘nationalism’ reveals significant differences in the ‘nationalism’ of different countries. What is most interesting is that the case clearly shows is that the ‘nationalistic’ discourse is built on relationship-specific social identification. The most obvious and important example of this is the Norwegian-Swedish relationship, having its historical roots in the Swedish colonization of Norway. It appears very clear that the Norwegian nationalism grew strong and sharp when the acquiring corporation was taken to be Swedish.

Our analysis also suggests that the acquiring (or colonizing) side easily justifies the actions within the 'rationalistic' framework while the acquired (or colonized) side may revert to a 'nationalistic' discourse. Thus the 'nationalistic' discourse can become a vehicle of change resistance. However, as this case very clearly shows, it is in the end very difficult to overcome the forces driving towards global industrial restructuring, legitimated by the dominant 'rationalistic' discourse.

## **2. Media Texts and Discourse**

Diverse approaches in discourse analysis have recently gained popularity in social sciences in general and in organization studies in particular.<sup>1</sup> What is discourse is, however, a question that has divided scholars (see e.g. van Dijk, 1997; Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000). Linguists seem to understand discourse as language use, psychologists as cognitions, and sociologists as social interaction (van Dijk, 1997). There are also different levels of analysis extending from utterances to meta-discourses, and different methods ranging from detailed textual analyses to a more abstract analysis of dominant social and societal discourses. In addition, the approaches in discourse analysis vary greatly in terms of the epistemological assumptions concerning discourses. In brief, the most radical constructivists emphasize the role of discourses as the elements through which social reality is created, while the more realist authors emphasize that discourses are only one part of social reality.

In this paper, we view discourses as an inherent part of the social construction of organizations, organizing, management and managing. Discourses are part of organizational action; they (re)define what is justified and legitimate. Following Fairclough's (1992) critical discourse analysis, we consider discourses as an inherent part of sociocultural practices which are embedded in social contexts. We view discourses as both socially conditioned and socially constitutive (Fairclough 1997).

Discourses in media texts are of particular interest to us as they have a particularly central role in the social construction of specific organizational and management in the public discussion. Our point of departure is that journalists often (re)produce commonly held views (e.g. Bourdieu 1998a; 1998b). In other words, journalists write what everybody already knows, and what they expect journalists to write: commonplaces as Bourdieu calls them. These commonplaces work because everyone can ingest them immediately and their very banality makes them something the speaker (journalist) and the listener (reader) have in common. The audience becomes part of the (re)construction; the legitimization of specific phenomena is enhanced as they become commonplaces and part of the horizon of expectations of the readers (Bourdieu 1998a; 1998b).

### ***2.1. Global Capitalism and Traces of Rationalistic Discourse***

Neo-liberalism is a political project for the restructuring and rescaling of social relations in accord with the demands of an unstrained global capitalism (Bourdieu 1999; Fairclough 2000). The (re)construction of the neo-liberal order is carried out, in part, through justifying managerial action in public discussion (see e.g. Vaara and Tienari, forthcoming).

It seems, however, that the role and influence of media has been discovered relatively recently in management and organization research. Mazza and Alvarez (2000), for example, argue that

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. the special issues in *Organization* (vol. 7, no 3) and *Human Relations* (vol. 53, no 9).

the popular press – nationwide newspapers and magazines – is an important arena where the legitimacy of management ideas and practices is (re)produced. They focus on the role of newspapers in the production and diffusion of Human Resource Management (HRM) practices in Italy, and elaborate on three sources of legitimacy in the newspaper texts for HRM: conformity to corporate values, adoption by large firms and successful performance.

Much of what Mazza and Alvarez (2000) report on how the legitimacy of the HRM phenomenon is constructed in media texts constitutes in our view a specific discourse type. Themes in the texts such as strategic role, competitiveness and competitive weapons in globalization, effectiveness and responsiveness to future challenges, and ‘links’ between practices and (financial) performance take part in constructing what we call rationalistic discourse.

Rationalistic discourse is arguably the core of global capitalism and the neo-liberal order. This discourse is typically characterized by a focus on ‘company level’ considerations in relatively abstract and objectified ways (Vaara and Tienari, forthcoming). Rationalistic refers here to economic and financial rationale, and to ‘keeping up with the times’ (i.e. contemporary ‘global’ transformation). Rationalistic discourse works through specific themes and voices to convince the reader of the justification and legitimacy of its rationale. In so doing, it can be argued to render – or force – the logic of the contemporary neo-liberal global economy ‘factual’ (cf. Fairclough 2000).

## ***2.2. Nationalism and Nationalistic Discourse***

Europe has been subject to the forces of global capitalism and the neo-liberal order particularly strongly in the Post-Cold War period. On the one hand, the continued ‘liberalization’ (deregulation) of markets and privatization of previously state-owned enterprises testify for this. On the other hand, it is evident that nationalism has undergone a revival in this context (see e.g. Lyons and Breakwell 1996). Nationalism appears to be one way to question (or perhaps to resist) the neo-liberal order.

We build our discussion on the idea that the meaning of ‘nation’ is socially constructed and reconstructed. Nationalism may be conceptualized as “an ideology which legitimates the existence and activities of territorial states on the basis of characteristics (‘ethnic’, cultural, linguistic, historical, etc.) supposedly shared by, and specific to, their inhabitants” (Low 2000, 356). Nationalism is often comprehended through individuals’ need for social or collective identity. National identity of the individual is continually in the making.

Nationalism itself depends, however, on a set of deeply held images of historical time and community. Narratives of origin and destiny are central for its (re)construction. Anderson (1983) talks about imagined, ‘invented’ histories of nationalism. Billig’s (1995) concept of banal nationalism refers to how the construct of nation is often accepted and reproduced mindlessly and uncritically, rendered possible by mundane habits of language, thought and symbolism (see also e.g. Condor 2000).

De Cillia et al (1999) have examined topics, discursive strategies and linguistic devices which are employed to construct, on the one hand, national sameness and uniqueness, and, on the other hand, distinctions from and differences to other national collectives. They build on Anderson’s (1983) seminal work on nations as imagined communities. De Cillia et al (1999, 153) argue that, as specific forms of social identities, national identities are “discursively, by means of language and other semiotic systems, produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed”.

Schlesinger (1991; 1993; 1997), among others, has written extensively on the construction of national identity in the media in post-Cold War Europe. Schlesinger (1991, 298) sketches a new space where “the contradictions between the defense of renascent national cultures and identities and the invasive strategies of transnational corporations are bound to present tricky problems”. He seems somewhat sceptical about how effective the media alone can be in constructing collective identities, and argues that relations between media and national identity are affected by wider, rapidly shifting, political, economic and cultural configurations (see also e.g. Boyle and Haynes 1996). Further, institutions of mass communication are themselves constituted within relations of politics and economy.

Yet it is probable that the media – popular press, for example – can be effective in reinforcing national identity also in somewhat surprising contexts. Brookes’ (1999) analysis of texts in the British press on the ‘mad cow disease’ exemplifies this in an interesting way. In evoking nationalistic sentiments, the media may draw from other social domains such as sports (see e.g. Boyle and Haynes 1996) or war and battle (see e.g. Risberg, Tienari and Vaara 2000). The media provides legitimation to management ideas and practices by linking them to socially accepted representations of reality; to a set of generally accepted norms and values (Mazza 1998). Particular associations enhance an emotional involvement in business issues (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; discussed in Mazza 1998).

The role of media in the construction, articulation and maintenance of nations and national identity is a timely research topic. In the context of the colonizing language of global capitalism, nationalism and national identity yet seems to be an underresearched area (see, however, e.g. Risberg, Tienari and Vaara 2000; Tienari, Vaara and Risberg 2000; Langer 2000). Discourse related to nations may work to counterbalance the rationalistic discourse in media texts.

### **3. Method and Data**

In this paper, we draw from critical discourse analysis as exemplified by Fairclough (1997; 2000) and De Cillia et al (1999). We employ a version of an “interdisciplinary approach that combines historical, socio-political and linguistic perspectives” (ibid., 157) in locating and situating texts and discourses in their context. We view individual media texts as ‘incomplete’ in the sense that meaning is constructed only when the reader connects texts to other texts (see also e.g. Fiske 1989a; Grant, Keenoy and Oswick 1998). Intertextuality is thus a crucial element in our work; one basis for our ‘readings’. Text and context are here examined separately. The prolonged acquisition process, then, becomes the immediate context where specific discourses operate. It is an analytical task to specify and illustrate these discourses.

Our material consists of an extensive collection of the media coverage following Merita-NoNordbanken’s initial offer to acquire Kreditkassen in September 1999 until the final acceptance of the acquisition in October 2000. The Norwegian material comprises articles published in *Dagbladet*, the second largest daily newspaper (MedieNorge’s Norwegian newspaper net circulation statistics in 1999 <http://medienorge.uib.no>), where the acquisition offer for Kreditkassen was initially published in September 20<sup>th</sup> 1999, *Verdens Gang*, the leading popular newspaper (and also the leading newspaper with its highest net circulation figure in 1999 according to MedieNorge statistics), and *Dagens Naeringsliv*, the leading daily business newspaper. The Swedish material consists of articles in *Dagens Nyheter*, the leading daily newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, the leading popular newspaper, *Dagens Industri*, the leading daily business newspaper, *Veckans Affärer*, the leading weekly business magazine, and

*Affärsvärlden*, the major monthly business magazine. The Finnish material comprises articles in *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading daily newspaper, *Ilta-Sanomat*, the leading popular newspaper, *Kauppalehti*, the leading daily business newspaper, and *Talouselämä*, the leading weekly business magazine. The table below summarizes the empirical material.

**Table 1: The articles included in the analysis**

Norway		Sweden		Finland	
Dagbladet	35	Dagens Nyheter	31	Helsingin Sanomat	37
Verdens Gang	53	Aftonbladet	9	Ilta-Sanomat	5
Dagens Naeringsliv	42	Dagens Industri	35	Kauppalehti	49
		Veckans Affärer	4	Talouselämä	5
		Affärsvärlden	8		
<b>Total</b>	130		87		96

Our analysis proceeded in two stages. We first identified key themes or topics in the media texts, paying special attention to the differences in the Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish texts. We then concentrated on the distinctive characteristics of the ‘rationalistic’ and ‘nationalistic’ discourses that played a central role in the texts.

## **4. Rationalistic and Nationalistic Discourses in Media Texts**

### **4.1. A Prolonged Cross-Border Acquisition**

Norway was the first Nordic country to be hit by a crisis in the financial services sector. After the severe crisis in the latter part of the 1980s, the State of Norway controlled the largest banks in the country. *Christiania Bank og Kreditkassen* (Kreditkassen) was the second largest bank after *Den norske Bank*.

The Swedish Nordbanken and the Finnish Merita Bank were created by domestic mergers after the financial crises of the early 1990s in the Swedish and Finnish banking sectors. The merger between Nordbanken and Merita in October 1997 led to the creation of *MeritaNordbanken* (MNB). It proved to be the beginning of the formation of a Nordic bank covering the Baltic Sea region.

Some two years after the formation of the Finnish-Swedish bank, MNB set its eyes on Norway looking for a suitable acquisition candidate. Kreditkassen appeared as a particularly interesting acquisition target. On September 20, 1999 MNB released its first offer to buy Kreditkassen for 17,6 billion Finnish marks. Were the Norwegians willing to sell, the new bank would exceed the Swedish *Handelsbanken* in size and become the largest bank in the Baltic Sea area with over seven million private customers and nearly half a million corporate clients.

However, the acquisition process proved to be time-consuming. The State of Norway held a 35 % stake in Kreditkassen, and decision-makers were reluctant to give up the control of the bank to foreigners. This was despite the assurances of the top management in MNB that the acquisition would not lead to downsizing in Norway. The Norwegian government immediately rejected MNB:s initial offer. The minority government led by Christian Democrats pointed out that it wanted to guarantee that the largest Norwegian financial institutions remain under domestic ownership. The Conservative Party, in opposition, was in

favour of the acquisition which would bring money for the State. The decision was then up to the largest party in Norway, the Labour Party, temporarily in opposition.

Other potential buyers appeared for Kreditkassen. Den norske Bank, also state-owned, and Swedish Handelsbanken announced their interest. No official offers were, however, yet made. Den norske Bank wanted to merge with Kreditkassen before its attack on other banks, and Handelsbanken wanted a firmer foothold in Norway. MNB's group CEO Hans Dalborg invited the State of Norway to buy a large share in the new bank including Kreditkassen.

The management and employees of Kreditkassen were willing to be bought by MNB. It seemed obvious that Kreditkassen would in any case no longer stay 'single'. Foreign acquirers seemed like the best alternative. A merger with Den norske Bank, for example, would lead to downsizing and a loss of jobs. The management of Kreditkassen made public its view indicating that MNB's offer was 'acceptable', although a higher offer would be 'even more acceptable'. The Norwegian Bank Investment Fund, Bankinvesteringsfond, in charge of the shares owned by the State of Norway in Kreditkassen, explicitly opposed the offer. MNB did not give up. When its original offer period expired, the offer was extended. The prolonged offer was until November 12, 1999.

During the autumn of 1999, Norwegian politicians made it clear that they wanted to keep a strong hold of the Norwegian banking system. On November 26, the Labour Party announced to have agreed with the minority government that the State's bank ownership would be concentrated in one institution only. Analysts were convinced that institution to be the largest bank, Den norske Bank, of which the state already owned 60 per cent, leaving Kreditkassen for the highest bidder. MNB prolonged its offer once again, until December 3.

While the Norwegians were working on the optimal banking solution, MNB renewed its offer several times. MNB also concentrated its efforts elsewhere, most notably Denmark. In March 2000, a merger between MNB and the Danish *Unidanmark* was announced. The top management in MNB were a step closer to their vision of a Nordic bank. In the eyes of Kreditkassen's management, the united MNB and Unidanmark became an even more appealing acquirer than before.

In mid-April 2000, MNB raised its offer on Kreditkassen and set a deadline for April 28. The Norwegian Minister of Finance forecasted an answer before summer vacations. The decision did indeed come, but it was not a positive one. At the end of May, the Norwegian government decided to sell the State's holding in Kreditkassen but rejected MNB's offer as too low. Speculations about other potential acquirers took off. Den norske Bank's offer would not have received political support, as it would have meant large rationalizations. According to analysts, the bank also would not have had the resources required by the acquisition. Therefore, Handelsbanken remained the only serious competitor for MNB. In June 2000, MNB raised its offer once more. This offer – the eighth one – was to expire at the end of August.

As the autumn came, the competition over Kreditkassen tightened. According to rumours in the market, four offers were made: in addition to MNB and Handelsbanken, *Föreningsbanken* (Sweden), and *ING Bank* (the Netherlands) were interested in Kreditkassen. In early October 2000 MNB prolonged its offer once again until October 20. This was the tenth – and final – extension of the offer to buy Kreditkassen. On October 16, Nordic Baltic Holding (i.e. MeritaNordbanken and Unidanmark) announced that Kreditkassen had joined the group. The Nordic bank had been formed after more than a year of negotiating, planning and waiting. The name *Nordea* was introduced.

#### **4.2. Topics in Media Texts**

The story above was followed and reported with great interest in Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish media. Some of the news topics surrounding the acquisition process were similar in all three countries; they were just seen from differing viewpoints. These related, for example, to the financial side of the acquisition, i.e. the synergy benefits, cost effectiveness and savings generated through the integration of the banks. The future of the Nordic bank was also a common topic. However, there were also topics that were discussed predominately in one country. The question of headquarter location was central in Norway, the question of possible post-merger integration problems interested Swedes, and the risks of the new bank for Finns was discussed in the Finnish press. A crude summary of the main topics is provided in Table 2.

**Table 2: Main topics in media texts**

	<b>Norway</b>	<b>Sweden</b>	<b>Finland</b>
Main topics	Synergies, strategic fit, cost effectiveness, savings Norwegian banking system Selling price Nordea's future Norwegian / foreign ownership, globalization Headquarter location The Swedish	Synergies, strategic fit, cost effectiveness, savings, size of the new bank Kreditkassen's and Nordea's performance The future of the Swedish banking sector Post-merger integration problems The Norwegians The men behind the acquisition	Synergies, strategic fit, cost effectiveness, savings Kreditkassen's and Nordea's performance Nordea's future Risks for Finland (what if - scenarios) Does Finland really benefit from the acquisition(s)? The Norwegians

There were also notable differences in the style of reporting in the different media. As could be expected, the tone of the tabloids was frequently the most critical.

#### **4.3. Rationalistic Discourse**

The 'rationalistic' discourse dominated most of the texts on the acquisition of Kreditkassen. Within this discursive frame, the acquisition was set against the background of inevitable industrial restructuring and internationalization/globalization. Especially those arguing in favor of the acquisition usually based their arguments on the rationalistic discourse. In brief, the following three arguments dominated the discussions: the need to grow and internationalize, the problems related to state ownership, and the synergies created by the acquisition.

The need to grow and internationalize was a central theme in all three countries. The following example is from Sweden:

*Inom banknäringen är man i dag övertygad om att bankerna måste expandera utanför de egna*      *Everyone in the banking business is confident nowadays that banks have to expand their*

*ländernas gränser för att klara sig i konkurrensen. operations across national borders in order to survive in the competition.*

(Extract from an article in *Aftonbladet*, October 16, 2000)

Typically, the reasons for the constant need to grow was not elaborated in more detail (“*everyone ... is confident*”). Rather, the need was most often taken for granted and stated as a ‘fact’. In one rare example, the Swedish *Aftonbladet* made an effort to justify the necessity of constant growth via acquisitions by comparing it to organic growth:

*I bankvärlden kostar det också att ta fram nya produkter och att bygga upp säkra och begripliga internetjänster. Alltså köper man hellre en konkurrent än att för egen maskin, och för egna pengar, bredda sortimentet. Eller också slår man sig ihop med någon annan för att göra utvecklingen av internetjänsterna billigare per kund.*

*It is costly to develop new products or to build secure and user-friendly internet services in the banking sector. Therefore buying a competitor is preferred over broadening product assortment with own money and resources. Forces can also be joined in order to develop cheaper internet services for their customers.*

(Extract from an article in *Aftonbladet*, March 7, 2000)

The received view seems to have been that large banks can provide services more cost-effectively and thereby gain competitive advantage. According to the media texts, growth is also beneficial to the shareholders, as it increases the value of the bank in the market. This is exemplified by a quote from the largest Finnish daily newspaper:

*Koko sinänsä ei tee autuaaksi, mutta etenkin norjalaisen Christianian liittäminen jälkeen koossa on erittäin kompakti ja suorituskykyinen pohjoismainen pankkipaketti, joka voi hyvinkin kiinnostaa suuren maailman jättipankkeja joko ostokohteena tai yhteistyökumppanina. Tällainen kehityskulku nostaisi merkittävällä tavalla shareholder valueta eli omistuksen arvoa.*

*Size itself does not make one happy, but particularly after the acquisition of Norwegian Christiania, Nordea will be a very compact and well-performing Nordic bank package, which might well be attractive to the world’s giant banks as an acquisition target or a potential partner. This kind of development significantly increases shareholder value.*

(Extract from an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 7, 2000)

Alongside the active support and justification for the acquisition, there were also texts with less open acts of convincing the readers through ‘rational’ argumentation. The tone in these texts is markedly matter-of-fact, as our Finnish example illustrates:

*Nykyajalle näyttää olevan tyypillistä, että fuusioista ja yritysjärjestelyistä tulee ikään kuin elämäntapa, keskeinen osa yritysjohton toimintaa. Yhdentyvillä markkinoilla on parempi olla itse ostamassa kuin tulla ostetuksi. Liiketoiminnan kasvattaminen esimerkiksi pankkisektorilla ei ole juuri mahdollista muuten kuin yritysostoin. Moninumeroiset kasvuluvut orgaanisen kasvun kautta ovat mahdollisia vain uusilla aloilla, kuten telekommunikaatiossa tai internetissä, joissa markkinat kasvavat. Vanhat alat joutuvat taistelemaan olemassa olevien markkinoiden kanssa.*

*It is typical of modern times that mergers have become a sort of way of life, an essential part of business management. In the integrating markets it is better to buy than to be bought. Expanding business in the banking sector, for example, is not possible to achieve in other ways than through acquisitions. Large growth figures through organic growth are reachable only in new businesses such as telecommunications or the internet, where markets are growing. Old industries have to fight with the existing markets.*

(Extract from an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 5, 2000)

The above reflects the fact that mergers and acquisitions have become, or are becoming, to be portrayed as a “*way of life*”. Ever more often, the fundamental rationale in merging and acquiring itself does not need to be spelled out in media texts – rather, the journalists (can) concentrate on commenting specific elements of the cases at hand (Kuronen, Tienari and Vaara 2001). In texts on the acquisition of Kreditkassen, the need to grow constantly, leading to integration across national borders and increasing globalization seems to have been seldom questioned. The potential negative aspects of this kind of general development were rarely raised, and when they were, they were not put in the headlines but mentioned towards the end of the articles.

In line with the growth argument, many journalists maintained that the Norwegian banking system was in dire need of reorganization. Keeping things as they were was not a serious option. *Verdens Gang* (Norway) wrote on 25 October 1999: “*Neither Kreditkassen nor Den norske Bank are today strong financial institutions. They are too small for that.*”

The second central argument supporting the acquisition was that the State of Norway was not an appropriate owner for a financial services institution such as Kreditkassen. In Norway, journalists pointed to the problems with current state of affairs and explained the problems by the central role of the politicians in state-owned companies:

*Men i finansverdenen foregår det en så rask og dynamisk utvikling at politikerne oftest kommer i bakleksa.*      *But the financial world is going through such a fast and dynamic development that politicians cannot usually keep up with the pace.*

(Extract from an article in *Dagbladet*, May 24, 2000)

In Sweden and Finland, the Norwegian government was specifically criticized for being inefficient and slow in making decisions concerning the future of the bank. The State ownership was considered old-fashioned and bad for the development of the Norwegian banking sector in general. The following example is from Finland:

*Jo viimeisten kahden vuoden ajan ekonomistit ja pankkiirit ovat nähneet ja tienneet, että myös norjalainen pankkisektori on pian pantava kilpailukykyisempään kuntoon. Silti poliitikot eivät ole tehneet mitään.*      *Already for the past two years economists and bankers have foreseen and known that the Norwegian banking sector, too, has to be soon developed to be more competitive. Yet politicians have not done anything about it.*

(Extract from an article in *Kauppalehti*, November 3, 1999)

Such arguments were not just stated as facts. Indicators proving that the government was not the right decision making body when it comes to business were presented to support the arguments. As a proof of the bad influence of State ownership on the Norwegian economy, the critics chose the development in the Oslo Stock Exchange. This is exemplified by an interview of Jan Eiler Fleischer, head of Gambak Fondsforvaltning, a major seller of funds in Norway, in the major Swedish daily business newspaper:

*... varför aktieutvecklingen på Oslo Börs stått stopp still medan de amerikanska och europeiska marknaderna stigit med mellan 10 och 30 procent hittills under innevarande kvartal. "Världsekonomin ser positiv ut, oljepriset har stigit och räntan har sänkts. Ändå ligger Oslo Börs platt. Orsaken till den dåliga utvecklingen*      *... why the share price development in the Oslo Stock Exchange is moderate while the American and European markets have risen between 10 and 30 percent during the ongoing quarter. "The world economy is doing well, the oil price has gone up, and the interest rates have fallen. Yet the Oslo Exchange stays still. The reason for the*

är regeringen” säger Fleischer.

*poor development is the government” says  
Fleischer.*

(Extract from an article in *Dagens Industri*, November 18, 1999)

Journalists argued that if ‘Norway’ wanted Kreditkassen to remain competitive, the bank had to have private owners leading the bank management to make competitive and rational decisions. Otherwise large foreign banks would eventually increase their market shares in Norway, shrinking the Norwegian banks’ profits and, in the end, leading the whole market. Curiously enough, the large stake of the Swedish state in MeritaNordbanken received very little attention in this context. The following is a rare example:

*Sinivalkoisuuden eli suomalaisomistuksen liukeneminen lähes näkymättömiin ei asiantuntija-arvion mukaan vaikuta Unidanmark-MeritaNordbankenin houkuttelevuuteen suomalaisten sijoitskohteena. Ruotsin valtion yhä suuri omistusosuus sen sijaan on omiaan jarruttamaan kiinnostusta ja kurssikehitystä.*

*According to experts, the almost complete dilution of Finnish ownership does not affect the attractiveness of Unidanmark-MeritaNordbanken as an investment target. However, the still large stake of the Swedish State in the bank has an adverse affect on investors’ interest and on the development of the bank’s share price.*

(Extract from an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 7, 2000)

The third major argument supporting the acquisition were the synergies created, often referred to as “strategic fit”. MeritaNordbanken, as a Nordic constellation, was portrayed as a ‘perfect’ solution for Kreditkassen in all three countries. The following example is from the leading Finnish daily business newspaper:

***Puolen miljardin synergiaedut***

*MeritaNordbanken hamuaa Christianiaa, sillä strategioiltaan pankit sopivat yhteen. Christianialla on esimerkiksi Meritan kaltainen laaja konttoriverkosto. Erikoisosaamista pankilla löytyy merenkulkualan, öljyteollisuuden ja kalanjalostuksen rahoittamisesta.*

***Synergies of a Half a Billion***

*MeritaNordbanken wants Christiania, because the banks’ strategies fit together well. For example, Christiania’s branch office network is similar to MeritaNordbanken’s. The bank is also competent in financing shipping, oil and fishing industries.*

(Extract from an article in *Kauppalehti*, September 21, 1999)

Headlines in Norway include “A good industrial model” (Verdens Gang, 20 September 1999) and “The industrially right and financially fair choice” (Dagens Naeringsliv, 29 February 2000). MeritaNordbanken’s strategy to create a Nordic bank group based on strong national banks seems to have been generally accepted by the journalists. The acquisition would also benefit Kreditkassen, as it could now exploit the other bank’s competences and have better access to capital. The strategic fit between MNB and Kreditkassen was considered good, and the synergies of euro 110 million generated by the acquisition – estimated by some analysts – were not questioned. For example, in an article in *Talouselämä*, the major Finnish business weekly, a Finnish bank analyst argued that in practice it is impossible to track these savings, but “one just has to believe that part of the savings are generated by the rationalizations following the merger”.

A large part of the discussion over the Kreditkassen acquisition in Norway, Sweden and Finland concentrated on financial and managerial issues, especially on performance evaluation. Kreditkassen was portrayed as an ideal acquisition target: analysts, managers, Norwegian politicians, and sometimes also competing banks’ management (when hinting that

MNB's offer was too low) considered Kreditkassen a well-run, healthy and wealthy bank. The Finnish Helsingin Sanomat, for example, wrote on October 17, 2000, after the acquisition deal was reached: "*MeritaNordbanken bought a well run and a well-performing bank in Norway.*"

The growth of the Nordic bank constellation, and its strong performance indicators, led analysts to speculate on its future. This acquisition of Kreditkassen appeared as a link in a chain of events, historical and anticipated (cf. Kuronen, Tienari and Vaara 2001). The group might well be of interest to some of the large banks – e.g. German or Dutch – as a convenient way to expand to the Nordic banking market:

***Pöytä on katettu, Deutsche Bank.***

*Tätä ei kukaan sanonut ääneen maanantaina, mutta monien pankkialaa seuraavien mielessä se varmasti oli. Merita ja Nordbanken kasasivat yhteispohjoismaiset finanssimarkkinat kokoon ripeässä tahdissa, kolmessa vuodessa. [...] Mistään pikkupaikan pikkupankista ei siis ole kyse. Ryhmä (Nordea) on houkutteleva kumppani isommalle pankille. Pankeilla kun on pyrkimys kasvaa muissakin maissa.*

***The table is served, Deutsche Bank.***

*No-one said it out loud on Monday, but surely many who follow the banking industry thought about it. Merita and Nordbanken have integrated the Nordic financial market fast, in three years. [...] So we are not talking about some small town bank here. The (Nordea) Group is an attractive partner to some bigger bank. After all, banks do have the tendency to grow in other countries, too.*

(Extract from an article in *Helsingin Sanomat*, October 17, 2000)

Unlike in earlier domestic mergers and acquisitions, extensive 'rationalization' and downsizing was not expected to follow MNB's acquisition of Kreditkassen (cf. Vaara and Tienari, forthcoming). Downsizing was to hit mainly the international operations of the new bank, and thereby touch the lives of a limited number of people. The only downsizing eventually reported in the media were to take place in New York, where MeritaNordbanken, Unidanmark and Kreditkassen combined their local operations. The manager in charge of operations in New York claimed the integration "*was the best thing that could have happened to us*" as one larger player is stronger than four small ones in the North American market (*Kauppalehti*, 31 January 2001). Public sympathy for the few laid-off employees was not extensive, as international bank analysts did not appear as a group very likely to remain unemployed.

#### ***4.4. Nationalistic Discourse***

The media texts in Norway, Sweden and Finland also drew from a 'nationalistic' discourse. This discourse framed the acquisition as part of the national development and international relationships of these countries, often portraying the acquisition as "national confrontation".

Norway, Sweden and Finland are neighboring countries in the northeastern corner of Europe. The Kingdom of Sweden has existed for a thousand years. After the Viking period, Norway was for a long time under Danish rule as part of a union with Denmark and Sweden. In 1814, Norway formed a new union with Sweden, which meant that Norway became part of the Swedish empire. However, the growing national movement led to a declaration of independence in 1905. Then Norway became an independent Kingdom of its own right. Already in 1150, the Swedish King Erik and his bishop Henrik lead a crusade to southwestern Finland. From the peace treaty of 1323 until 1809, Finland was a Dukedom in the Kingdom of Sweden. Thereafter, Finland was a Grand Duchy within Imperial Russia until 1917. That year, Finland for the first time gained its independence.

Sweden and Finland joined as full members of the European Union at the beginning of 1995. In both countries the decision to join was based on the result of a referendum held in autumn 1994. In contrast to its neighbors, after a similar referendum, Norway decided to stay outside the EU. Further, Finland became part of the EMU, to be linked by a joint currency from the beginning of 2002, while the Swedish government decided to stay outside this endeavor.

In the acquisition of Kreditkassen, the nationalistic discourse was evident in media texts in all three countries – albeit in somewhat different forms. In Norway, especially those resisting the acquisition most often reverted to the nationalistic discourse in their argumentation. Most of the nationalistic reflections referred – explicitly or implicitly – to national interests without specifying very clearly what was meant by such “interests”. However, in some cases, the texts referred very clearly to the increasing foreign ownership and the risks associated with foreign control. The following quote from *Dagbladet*, a Norwegian daily newspaper, is a classic example of convincing through statistics:

*Utenlandske selskaper overtar i stigende grad norsk næringsliv. På ti år er utenlandsk kapital investert i Norge mer enn tredoblet: fra 73 milliarder kroner i 1990 til 232 milliarder i fjor. I 1996 arbeidet nær 120 000 nordmenn i 3000 norske selskaper med utenlandsk eiermajoritet, i dag er ytterligere 1000 «norske» aksjeselskaper på utenlandske hender.*

*Foreign companies are increasingly taking over Norwegian businesses. Over the last ten years the amount of foreign capital invested in Norway has more than tripled: from 73 billion crowns in 1990 to 232 billion crowns last year. In 1996 almost 120 000 Norwegians worked in 3000 Norwegian companies with a majority of foreign owners, today there is another 1000 “Norwegian” companies in foreign hands.*

(Extract from an article in *Dagbladet*, November 20, 2000)

The following excerpt, in turn, considers more directly the future of the Norwegian financial system:

*Stortinget har vedtatt at vi skal ha tre nasjonale bank- og finansinstitusjoner. Etter salget av Kreditkassen til MeritaNordbanken har vi én igjen. Norge er i ferd med å bli et filialdistrikt i utkanten av Europa. Toppolitikere og næringslivstopper er bekymret.*

*The parliament has approved that we will have three national bank- and financial institutions. After selling Kreditkassen to MeritaNordbanken we would have only one left. Norway is in danger of becoming a subsidiary district in Europe’s periphery. Top politicians and top business managers are worried.*

(Extract from an article in *Dagbladet*, November 20, 1999)

Norwegian journalists justified their negative attitude towards foreign ownership with the will to maintain decision making power in domestic hands. Consistent with the nationalist ideology, Norwegians saw themselves as different from the other European nations. In an article in *Dagbladet*, Norway was compared to Jevnaker, a small town near Oslo:

*I global forstand kan nemlig Norge fortone seg nettopp som et Jevnaker, et lite samfunn, utenfor allfarvei, som sliter med å henge med i turbokapitalismen, som er rikt på jord og skog, men likevel ei bygd med lange, sosialdemokratiske industritradisjoner som har fostret kjemper det står respekt av langt bortenfor Hadeland.*

*In the global context Norway may seem like Jevnaker, a small community, outside normal roads, working hard to hang along in the turbocapitalism, which is rich of land and woods, but likewise not built with long social democratic industrial traditions, which have raised fighters respected far beyond Hadeland.*

(Extract from an article in *Dagbladet*, October 23, 1999)

Interestingly, Norwegian journalists were at times concerned with how the others, from a rationalistic perspective, would react to the Norwegian nationalism:

*Stopper regjeringen et salg til MeritaNordbanken, vil trolig påstandene om norsk nasjonalisme blusse opp igjen.*      *If the government prevents the acquisition, claims of Norwegian nationalism will probably rise again.*

(Extract from an article in *Verdens Gang*, December 27, 1999)

The word “again” is significant here. In part, such concerns relate to the earlier negotiated merger agreement between the state-owned telecommunications companies *Telia* (Sweden) and *Telenor* (Norway). This merger was never realized due to disputes in relation to, for example, the location of the headquarters of the most prestigious divisions in the new company.

Sweden was, indeed, a central reference target in the nationalistic texts in Norway. It is important to note that many of the texts in the Norwegian media presented MeritaNordbanken as a ‘Swedish’ bank: “*Svensk bank vil kjøpe Kreditkassen*” - “*A Swedish bank wants to buy Kreditkassen*” (*Verdens Gang*, 20 September 1999). Consequently, the acquisition was often portrayed as a battle between the Norwegians and Swedes, as the following excerpt illustrates:

*I går ble vi verdensmestrer i håndball. Når samferdselsminister Dag Jostein Fjærvoll i dag reiser til Stockholm, må han - på vegne av Bondevik-regjeringen og hele den norske patriotismen - slå svenskene i den stadig mer brutale fusjonskrigen. Og det er ikke første gang nordmenn og svensker er i krig med hverandre...*      *Yesterday we became world champions in (ladies) handball. When minister of traffic, Dag Jostein Fjærvoll, today goes to Stockholm, can he – on behalf of the Bondevik government and the whole Norwegian patriotism – beat the Swedish in the increasingly hardened merger war. And it will not be the first time Norwegians and Swedish are in war against each other...*

(Extract from an article in *Dagbladet*, December 13, 1999)

The historical ‘Big Brother – Little Brother’ relationship between Sweden and Norway appeared to characterize a major part of the Norwegian reflections. Sometimes this relationship was also explicitly commented on in the Norwegian media:

*Dagbladet har foretatt en uhøytidelig gjennomgang av de norsk-svenske krigene. Hvem vinner egentlig landskampen mellom lillebror Norge og storebror Sverige?*      *Dagbladet has made a review of the wars between Norway and Sweden. Who will finally win the match between little brother Norway and big brother Sweden?*

(Extract from an article in *Dagbladet*, December 13, 1999)

Against this background, it is not surprising to note that the more the acquisition was portrayed as a setting between Norway and Sweden, the more traces of questioning and criticism towards foreign ownership could be found in the Norwegian media texts. Some of the journalists also appeared to be conscious of this tension:

*MeritaNordbanken er stadig nærmere en full overtagelse av Kreditkassen. Telianor-fadesen kan gjøre det vanskelig for regjeringen å si nei til den*      *MeritaNordbanken is closer to fully overtaking Kreditkassen. Telianor-stumble might make it difficult for the government to say no to the*

*svensk-finske banken.*

*Finnish-Swedish bank.*

(Extract from an article in *Verdens Gang*, December 27, 1999)

While Kreditkassen was typically portrayed in Swedish and Finnish media texts as an ideal acquisition target for MeritaNordbanken, there were speculations on Norwegian nationalism. In the context of the prolonged acquisition, Norwegians were often depicted as non-decisive, difficult, extremely patriotic and suspicious of foreigners and not having much business sense despite their oil money. For example, the Swedish media paid attention to the poor development of the Oslo Stock Exchange, claiming that the flat indexes were caused by poor decisions of the Norwegian government.

*Höstens spel kring Kreditkassen och Dyno visar tydligt de norska politikernas brist på marknadsinsikt. I Norge detta speciellt problematisk eftersom staten är synonymt med kapitalet i högre grad än i något annat industrialiserat land. Därför ligger orsakerna till Oslobörsens dåliga utveckling djupare än bara i de senaste månadernas politiska villervalla.*

*This autumn's game around Kreditkassen and Dyno demonstrate clearly the Norwegian politicians' lack of understanding of market. This is particularly problematic in Norway, because there the State is a synonym for capital to a higher degree than in any other industrialised country. Therefore the reasons for the poor development of the Oslo Stock Exchange lie much deeper than in the last few months' political confusion.*

(Extract from an article in *Dagens Industri*, November 18, 1999)

In Finland, when MeritaNordbanken first 'proposed' to Kreditkassen, *Kauppalehti* concentrated on introducing the strange financial world in Norway to its readers. Several articles presented Norwegians as very negative towards foreign ownership of Norwegian institutions such as banks compared with, for example, the Finns or Swedish. This attitude was explained by the fact that Norway stayed outside the European Union, and therefore they highly valued national ownership.

*Vaikka kansallisen omistuksen perinteinen merkitys vähenee muualla, EU:n ja euroalueen ulkopuolelle jääneessä Norjassa kansallinen omistus saattaa olla vielä vahva arvo..*

*Although the significance of domestic ownership is decreasing elsewhere, it might still be a strong value in Norway, as the country has stayed out of the EU and the Euro zone.*

(Extract from an article in *Kauppalehti*, September 21, 1999)

Many of the Finnish texts could even ridicule – from a rationalistic perspective – Norwegian nationalism. In this context, it is ironical to note that the Finnish media coverage on the merger between Merita and Nordbanken in 1997 was characterized by very similar kind of blunt nationalism (see Tienari, Vaara and Risberg, 2000).

The Swedish were concerned about how the “Norwegian attitude” would make the post-merger integration a difficult task and prevent MeritaNordbanken from making rational decisions (note the direct reference to Telia-Telenor):

*De branschexperter som DI har talat med menar dock att banken kommer att få ett tufft arbete med smälta samman de bägge bankerna. [...] En annan analytiker varnar för att nationell och politisk prestige kommer att försvåra sammanslagningen av de båda bankerna. “Precis som i fallet med Telia-Telenor kommer det bli svårt för banken att*

*The experts DI has been in contact with argue that the bank will have a hard task in melting the banks into one. [...] Another analyst warns that national and political prestige will make the integration more difficult. “Exactly as in the Telia-Telenor case it will be difficult for the bank to make market-based optimal decisions.*

*fatta marknadsmässigt optimala beslut. Norwegians are not known for their nationalism without a reason. Nationalism will probably be a more important issue than competence when managers are being appointed.*  
*Norrmännen är inte kända för sin nationalism utan orsak. Nationalitet kommer förmodligen bli viktigare än kompetens när chefer för verksamheten ska utses."*

(Extract from an article in *Dagens Industri*, October 17, 2000)

Even the prime minister of Sweden, Göran Persson, criticized Norwegians for their behavior. In November 1999, he advised the Norwegians to accept the offer and sell Kredikassen to MeritaNordbanken. Norwegians were not exactly delighted of Mr Persson's comments. It was considered inappropriate that the Swedish prime minister criticized Norwegians so directly:

*Sveriges statsminister Göran Persson orker ikke mer av den norske passiviteten og mistenksomheten! [...] I første omgang ber Persson om at MeritaNordbanken får kjøpe Kredikassen. Han mener den norske næringspolitikken ikke er tilpasset fremtidens utfordringer. [...] Det er uvanlig at andre lands statsministere så direkte går til angrep på et annet lands samarbeidsvilje. Trolig er det bråket omkring Telia/Telenor og Kredikassen / MeritaNordbanken som får Persson til å ta bladet fra munnen.*  
*Sweden's prime minister Göran Persson is tired of Norwegian passivity and indecisiveness! [...] Persson asks for MeritaNordbanken to be granted a permission to acquire Kredikassen. He assesses that the Norwegian politics are not adapted to future's challenges. [...] It is unusual that one country's prime minister attacks so directly another country's will to cooperate. It is probably the dispute around the Telia/Telenor and Kredikassen/MeritaNordbanken cases, which makes Persson to say out loud what he thinks.*

(Extract from an article in *Verdens Gang*, November 10, 1999)

As a curious sideline, when MeritaNordbanken's offer was finally accepted, the press in Finland also paid attention to the Swedish Handelsbanken, which lost the bid for Kredikassen. Headlines such as "*Handelsbanken came up empty-handed*" (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 17 October 2000) and "*Handelsbanken lost again*" (*Kauppalehti*, 17 October 2001) made it clear that MeritaNordbanken had beaten its Swedish rival. The article following the above headline in *Kauppalehti* focused on all the deals Handelsbanken had lost in the past.

It should be noted that at times the media in the three countries – as well as the top managers of the new banking group – emphasized the positive sides of "Nordism" characterizing the new constellation when supporting the deal, as in the following:

*För kunden kan det finnas stora fördelar med en gränsöverskridande bank. I Köpenhamn och Malmö kommer samarbetet öka när Öresundsbron öppnar i sommar. I Haparanda och Torneå finns redan en bro och där samarbetar kommunerna redan intimt om exempelvis grundskolan.*  
*A cross-national bank may bring several benefits to the customer. The cooperation between Copenhagen and Malmö will increase when the Öresund bridge will be opened this summer. There is already a bridge between Haparanda and Torneå and for example the comprehensive schools in those area cooperate already in close contact.*

(Extract from an article in *Aftonbladet*, March 7, 2000)

In this excerpt, the bridge metaphor symbolizes the benefits of Nordic cooperation (the Öresund bridge connects the Danish capital Copenhagen and Malmö, a Southern Swedish city; the bridge between Haparanda and Torneå connects Northern Finland and Sweden). What is interesting is that this "Nordism" may be seen as a new type of regional collective identity building that is not national but neither pan-European.

Finally, the key decision-makers were often presented as heroes or scapegoats in the nationalistically oriented texts. The two men whose names were mentioned most often during the acquisition process were Hans Dahlborg (a Swede), CEO of MeritaNordbanken, and Tom Ruud (a Norwegian), CEO of Kreditkassen. In Sweden, Hans Dahlborg became somewhat of a hero, the man who beat the Norwegian resistance. *Aftonbladet* characterised him as “*förbannat trevlig karl*”, a damn good guy, and even the king of the Nordic banking sector. Tom Ruud, who had supported MNB’s acquisition from the very beginning was considered in Sweden a respectable, competent and experienced man who had led many successful acquisitions. In Norway, however, in an article in *Dagbladet* written after the acquisition, he was presented as “*the man who sold Kreditkassen*”. The article paid attention to the personal benefits (a top position in the new integrated bank and some half a million Norwegian crowns coming from the stock price increase), providing him a good enough reason to support the acquisition – or sell out the Norwegians.

## 5. Conclusion

Our analysis of Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish media texts on the acquisition of Christiania Bank og Kreditkassen by MeritaNordbanken illustrates the dominance of the ‘rationalistic’ discourse – even in a case that raised a great deal of nationalistic concerns. The ‘rationalistic’ discourse can be seen as a variant of the more general discourse of ‘neo-liberalism’ (Bourdieu, 1998) or ‘global capitalism’ (Fairclough, 2000). Within this discourse, widely taken as the most legitimate one, international mergers and acquisitions were constructed as taken-for-granted or inevitable parts of the international/global restructuring of the financial sector.

The ‘rationalistic’ discourse clearly reflects a modernist or positivist worldview (see e.g. Lyotard, 1979) in that the arguments of various actors usually referred to ‘plans’, ‘analyses’ or ‘calculations’ when justifying their views. What is interesting is that the texts drawing from this discourse often presented these calculations – usually based on crude evaluations of economic development and preliminary ideas about cost savings or efficiency improvements – as “factual” future projections that were rarely contested. One explanation for this lack of critical scrutiny is that international mergers and acquisitions are characterized by “information asymmetry” as the top decision makers of the acquiring companies are also gatekeepers of much of the information that others would need to challenge their views.

What makes the Kreditkassen case specifically interesting is the ‘nationalistic’ discourse that was prevalent especially in the Norwegian media. In a sense, this case shows how nationalistic concerns are still able to challenge the logic of international restructuring – especially the rationale of foreign acquisitions. In contrast to the ‘rationalistic’ discourse, the rhetoric of the ‘nationalistic’ texts was often emotional and appealed to taken-for-granted, although often ambiguous, collective national sentiments (De Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak, 1999). The logic of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995), indeed, appears to be similar in different national contexts. This case, for example, clearly illustrates how the specific companies were easily associated with Norwegian, Swedish or Finnish “national interests” without further reflection in the media of the respective countries.

However, a closer scrutiny of the ‘nationalistic’ discourse reveals significant differences in the ‘nationalism’ of different countries. To an extent, this is easy to understand as the very ideas of nationalism are built on an aspiration to create unique collective identity that differentiates a specific nation from others. Hence, for example, “being Norwegian” is historically and culturally very different from “Swedishness” or “Finnishness”. However, that

is only a partial explanation. What this case illustrates is that the ‘nationalistic’ discourse is built on relationship-specific social identification. The most obvious and important example in the present context is the Norwegian-Swedish relationship. It appears clear that the Norwegian nationalism grew strong and sharp when the acquiring corporation was taken to be Swedish. In contrast, when MeritaNordbanken or Nordea was depicted as a “Finnish-Swedish”, “Nordic” or even “European”, the discourse was much more moderate. This can be understood by a peculiar “Big Brother – Little Brother” relationship of Swedes and Norwegians that has its historical roots in the Swedish colonization of Norway. This complex superiority-inferiority relationship has also been recently reconstructed, for example, in the Telia-Telenor case. Interestingly, the Norwegian-Swedish relationship resembles, to a large extent, the Finnish-Swedish relationship. In fact, the Finnish media coverage of the merger between Merita and Nordbanken was in many ways similar to this case (Risberg, Vaara and Tienari, 2000).

It should be noted that in the present context ‘nationalism’ was most clearly associated with change resistance. A crude interpretation of the media coverage in the three countries is that it was the threat of being taken over in Norway that triggered the ‘nationalistic’ discourse. In Sweden and Finland, in turn, the ‘Norwegian nationalism’ became at times even a topic of mockery. That is, from a ‘rationalistic’ perspective, the Finns, for example, could ridicule the most blunt nationalism of the Norwegians. Ironically, and most interestingly, the Finnish ‘nationalism’ in the MeritaNordbanken media coverage some time before had not been that different from the Norwegian reactions.

On the whole, this case suggests that the acquiring (or colonizing) side easily justifies the actions within the ‘rationalistic’ framework while the acquired (or colonized) side reverts to a ‘nationalistic’ discourse. Although this case was characterized by particularly strong resistance drawing on nationalistic concerns, the ‘nationalistic’ movement in Norway could not in the end prevent the acquisition from taking place. One can interpret this as an illustration of how difficult it is to overcome the forces driving towards global industrial restructuring, legitimated by the dominant ‘rationalistic’ discourse.

In sum, our analysis of the Kreditkassen case has pointed to the significant role of ‘rationalistic’ and ‘nationalistic’ discourses in the social construction of international mergers and acquisitions. In our view, there is a need to go further with such analyses and especially analyze the more micro-level elements in these discourses. For example, the rhetorical ability of different actors – such as top managers, journalists or politicians – to make use of the different discourses deserves specific attention. Another important research topic would be to analyze the ideological foundations of the different types of discourse that are easily passed unnoticed.

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