

## Conditions for political leadership in pluricentric Scandinavian regions

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**Abstract**

How does the increasingly pluricentric character of regional governance in Denmark, Sweden and Norway condition the political leadership of politicians elected at regional levels of government? In regional governance, politicians elected at different levels of governance compete for political leadership, and this competition is particularly intense in pluricentric regional governance arenas with a weak division of political power. In such cases, the political leadership capacity of elected politicians at regional levels of governance depends on their ability to attract regional followers and to mobilise the support and resources of strong, influential regional stakeholders. From an analysis of recent institutional reforms in the three Scandinavian countries and a literature review of the role played by politicians in regional governance in the wake of these reforms, the article concludes that Scandinavian regional governance is strongly pluricentric (with some variation), and that recent reforms have contributed to making it even more pluricentric in character.

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**Introduction**

Due to the increasingly multi-level and multi-actor character of regional governance in Europe, political decision-making tends to take the form of pluricentric coordination rather than sovereign rule (Kersbergen & Waarden, 2004). 'Pluricentric coordination' refers to governance processes in which multiple authoritative centres of power interact in competitive as well as collaborative ways in order to realise desired governance outcomes (Pedersen, Sehested & Sørensen, 2011; Sørensen, 2014). Regional governance is generically pluricentric, as the term 'region' refers to a territory rather than to a specific level in the political system with formal political authority to govern that territory (Rhodes & Wright, 1987; Keating, 1998). All levels in the political systems are engaged in activities that are, or could be, categorised as regional governance. Moreover, the traditionally strong focus on growth and development in regional governance has

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entailed the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders in regional policy development and policy implementation. The New Regionalism Paradigm in EU regional policies (EU, 2011; Gibbs et al., 2001, Wheeler, 2002; Morgan, 2004), as well as the shift towards an 'information society' policy approach to growth and development, has further advanced the 'networked' or pluricentric character of regional governance in the Scandinavian countries<sup>1</sup> (Normann & Isaksen, 2009; Baldersheim, Haug & Øgård 2009; 2011).

However, few studies of regional governance in Scandinavia have examined how elected politicians exercise political leadership of the increasingly pluricentric regions. This article examines the political leadership capacity of politicians elected at regional levels of government in the wake of recent government reforms. We take as our point of departure the assumption that political leadership of pluricentric governance processes deviates from what can be termed 'sovereign' forms of leadership. Drawing on document studies and a literature review of regional governance in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, the article sheds light on how institutional conditions support or hamper regional politicians in their endeavour to lead the regions. While fully recognising that personality, individual capacities and role perceptions are key factors in political leadership, we find that institutional conditions play an equally important role, and that institutional reforms should take into account how they affect the capacity of elected politicians to exercise political leadership.

In this article, we first develop a concept of pluricentric political leadership and identify the institutional conditions that promote or obstruct this particular kind of leadership. Then we apply this analytical framework in discussing the institutional conditions for exercising political leadership among politicians elected in Denmark's 5 regions, Sweden's 20 *landsting* and regions, and Norway's 18 (19)<sup>2</sup> *fylkeskommuner*. We conclude by discussing the insights gained regarding regional political leadership in Scandinavia, and propose an agenda for future studies.

## Defining pluricentric political leadership

Although employing various different concepts and theoretical frameworks to describe emerging trends in public governance, social scientists in disciplines as diverse as public administration research, political science, political sociology and urban planning deliver basically the same message: public governance is an outcome of complex interplays involving plural, operationally autonomous but interdependent actors – and not the result of sovereign decisions made by a single public authority (Jessop, 2002; Kooiman, 2003; Pollitt, 2003; Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Bache & Flinders, 2004; Healey, 2007; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007; Torfing et al., 2012). In this article, we employ the term 'pluricentric coordination' proposed by Kersbergen and Waaden (2004), defined as *processes in which multiple authoritative centres of power compete and/or collaborate in attempting to realise desired governance outcomes*. The term 'pluricentric' encapsulates the multi-level as well as multi-actor character of contemporary re-

gional governance processes, while the term ‘coordination’ indicates that regional governance involves many mutual adjustments between the actors involved. These adjustments are far from harmonious, often entailing formal and informal power struggles between public authorities as well as between public and private actors. Thus, ‘pluricentric coordination’ is well suited for analysing regional governance as a process in which transnational, national, regional and municipal governments seek political power and influence in fierce competition, as well as through the formation of strategic alliances with each other and stakeholders.

What are the implications of the surge of pluricentric governance for the exercise of political leadership? According to Robert Tucker’s (1995) widely recognised definition, political leadership is a function that involves identifying a policy problem that calls for political action, proposing a solution to this problem, and then mobilising support through the creation or ongoing maintenance of a group of followers – a political community. In traditional theories of representative government, elected politicians are placed in the leadership role as sovereign rulers of a political community understood as the people living in a given territory. Once elected, politicians lead much in the same way as kings govern their kingdom. In pluricentric governance, there are no sovereign positions from which elected politicians can exercise political leadership. The ability to lead depends on whether elected politicians can exploit the hands they have been dealt in the form of political leadership resources that can be turned into power and influence in pluricentric policy processes. What political leaders in pluricentric circumstances need are resources that can ensure access and influence in collaboration, negotiating and bargaining processes with important authoritative centres of power, and with stakeholders.

From public administration theory and theories of political leadership, we note that various types of resources appear important for politicians who aspire to exercise pluricentric political leadership. Christopher Hood’s (1986) NATO criteria list *nodality*, *authority*, *treasure* and *organisation* as major resources for actors who seek power and influence. In pluricentric governance, nodality is important because power and influence depend on the intensity and density of the institutional linkages to public and private key actors. Formal authority is important, not as a sovereign right to rule or gain influence, but as a ticket to participation in the governance process. More important is informal authority that rests on the number of supporters that can be mustered on Election Day and between elections, as well as being able to mobilise the active support and empowered political participation from influential stakeholders and other members of the political community in the pursuit of desired governance outcomes. Followers and political support can be traded into influence in governance arenas in much the same way as can wealth and organisational capacity, because all of these resources create interdependencies that produce bargaining power. Given this translation of Hood’s NATO criteria into a listing of resources valuable to pluricentric political leaders, a study of the conditions that politicians elected at regional levels of governance have for exercising pluricentric political leadership must answer the following questions:

1. How dense and intense are their institutionalised linkages to other authoritative centres of power? This requires identifying the institutionalised arenas and procedures where regional politicians engage in shared decision-making with national and municipal politicians.
2. To what extent do the formal authoritative powers of politicians elected at regional levels of government support their efforts to exercise pluricentric political leadership in regional governing processes? Answering this question requires a study of the formal decision-making powers of regional politicians in various policy areas vis à vis those of other authoritative key actors.
3. How much informal authority can regional politicians muster in the form of public support, and how are the conditions for recruiting followers and mobilising and nurturing this support? Here we need to know more about how current regional entities match a well-consolidated regional political community, and about the communication channels – regional newspapers, TV channels and regular public political events – available to regional politicians seeking to recruit and mobilise support.
4. What amount of treasure and organisational capacity can regional politicians invest in interdependent negotiation processes? Are the funding and organisational assets available to them sufficient to attract attention and spur willingness to collaborate among other political actors?

To answer these questions we turn to a case study of the institutional conditions for exercising pluricentric political leadership in Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

### Pluricentric political leadership in Scandinavia

The case studies presented below draw on an analysis of recent government reforms in the three countries, showing how these reforms have advanced the pluricentric character of regional governance, and exploring how they condition the exercise of pluricentric political leadership among regional politicians in Denmark's regions, Sweden's *Landsting* and regions, and Norway's *fylkeskommuner*. Are they in a position that supports their efforts to place problems on the regional political agenda, propose solutions and obtain support for these solutions among the members of a regional political community?

In addition to document studies of the content of recent government reforms, the analysis builds on a review of the relatively few studies of how regional politicians exercise political leadership in the wake of these reforms. The results

of the case studies are summarised in Table 1, organised around the four research questions listed above.

Table 1. Empirical findings

	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Norway</i>
<i>How pluricentric is regional governance?</i>	Highly pluricentric regional governance arena	Highly pluricentric regional governance arena (where there are regions rather than county councils)	Highly pluricentric regional governance arena (e.g., over 30 regional offices of national agencies)
<i>How does the formal authority of regional politicians enable them to take on a leadership role in pluricentric governance processes?</i>	Formal authority strong in health policy; less so in regional growth and development policies	Formal authority strong in health policy; Strong also in regional growth and development policies in the regions, but weaker in the county councils	Formal authority strong in regional development and planning, but weaker in public services
<i>How much support can regional politicians get from a regional political community?</i>	Immense variation among regions.	Variation, but good opportunities to mobilise support.	Variation. Good opportunities to mobilise support, although the sense of political community is weak
<i>How much funding and organisational capacity do regional politicians possess?</i>	Funding and organisational capacity available primarily in the area of health policy, less so in other areas.	Considerable funding, mainly through the regional income tax. Regions can mobilize support from other sources.	Funding through regional income tax, but tax-level is nationally regulated. Can mobilize support from public and private sources.

### Regional political leadership in Denmark

The regional level of government in Denmark has been on a turbulent journey from a de-concentrated state administration (before 1970), over a period of sovereign political rule (1970–2007), to many centres of power in a pluricentric regional governance structure (from 2007). This development has evolved around two large municipal reforms. The first one, implemented in the early

1970s, established 14 (later 13) counties positioned as a sovereign rulers. Other levels of government were involved in regional governance, but with a clear separation of formal authority among them. The political leadership was organised as a representative democracy with a democratically elected County Council that had decision-making powers over many policy areas, including health-care services, special education and social care, secondary schools and various other educational institutions, regional planning and infrastructure, regional traffic, and environmental regulation. Moreover the counties were empowered to levy taxes. The political process was mainly an in-house activity involving internal political battles between politicians of different parties in the various standing political committees (Bogason, 1997; Blom-Hansen et al., 2012). The regional political identity among members of the public varied between counties, and the in-house approach to policy-making did little to strengthen feelings of regional political community among local residents. County newspapers and regional radio and TV channels were available to regional politicians seeking to recruit followers and mobilise support, mainly in the run-up to elections. The sovereign position of the County Council meant that, once elected, its political power and influence did not depend on the level of informal authorisation it enjoyed or the active support it could muster between elections. The institutional set-up of county-level political leadership gave politicians a role as strong and influential sovereign rulers with a sizeable task portfolio.

The second municipal reform of 2007 changed that completely (Danish Government, 2007; Christoffersen & Klausen, 2007; Mouritzen, 2010; Sørensen, 2014). Five regions replaced the 13 counties, and the position of the politicians was transformed from sovereign rulers to one out of several centres of power in a regional pluricentric governance arena where formal authority was shared, not divided between levels of government (Indenrigs- og sundhedsministeriet, 2006; Mouritzen, 2010; Sørensen, Sehested & Reff, 2011). In this new context, the power and influence of politicians elected at regional levels of governance depends largely on their ability to collaborate and form alliances with other centres of authoritative power, like state agencies and municipalities, and to mobilise followers and support from strong private actors and members of the public at and between elections. The ability to govern and lead depends to a considerable extent on access to the leadership resources listed in Table 1.

We can note, first, that the 2007 reform has institutionalised a high density and intensity in linkages between members of the Regional Council and other influential regional actors (Mouritzen, 2010; Pedersen, Sehested & Sørensen, 2011). Various pluricentric decision-making bodies have been established for coordination purposes. A regional Contact Council is to coordinate decisions in all areas of regional policy making between the Regional Council and the Municipalities in each region. A Growth Forum composed of regional and municipal politicians and public and private stakeholders in the region is responsible for distributing funding to projects and initiatives aimed at promoting business opportunities in the region. A Health Coordination Committee with regional and municipal politicians and administrators coordinates the provision and financing

of hospital services; and similar bodies for pluricentric coordination have been established in areas such as regional employment and traffic (Sundhedsstyrelsen, 2009). Participation in these pluricentric decision-making bodies ensures the nodality of politicians elected at regional levels of governance (Rasmussen & Sørensen, 2011; Nielsen, 2011; Sørensen & Christensen, 2011).

Second, the ability of the members of the Regional Council to exploit this nodality has been to some extent restricted by the limited formal authority available after 2007. Much of the task portfolio of the County Councils was either centralised to the state or decentralised to the municipalities; and in remaining areas (like regional development, specialised social services and health), the cards dealt to the regions were strong only in the area of health, where they were responsible for hospital care to support their position as regional political leaders. In all other areas, the municipalities united and managed to take over the regional political leadership of the pluricentric governance processes (Fotel, 2011; Pedersen, Sehested & Sørensen, 2011).

Third, how much informal authority the members of the Regional Council can muster and mobilise in the form of support from a regional political community? As outlined in Table 1, the answer depends on whether there exists a regional political community to address; and what channels and platforms are available to regional politicians for setting the political agenda, proposing, explaining and defending policy solutions, and recruiting and mobilising followers. As to the first factor, the 2007 reform has done little to ensure that the new regional boundaries fit with existing political community sentiments in the population. It is focused on establishing regions that are not too divergent in size; the general result has been regions with a weak sense of shared destiny and belongingness. Here we may note the capital region, which includes the island of Bornholm; and Region South, which covers the island of Funen and the southern part of Jutland (Mouritzen, 2010). Moreover, efforts to create political community sentiments that follow the new regional boundaries are hampered by the lack of media channels and public platforms for communication between the members of the Regional Council and members of the public. In practice, it is very difficult for the Regional Council to set a political agenda in public debates, and to defend and explain its decisions. For instance, the decision to close down Roskilde hospital in Region Zealand encountered heavy resistance from the local media, leading to intense popular protests, and the plans for a future hospital structure were attacked by the national media as being unprofessional and inefficient. The Regional Council in Zealand had very few opportunities to defend and explain its decision to the public (Iversen & Bjerrum, 2010; Pedersen, 2011). Recognising their weak informal authority, the Danish Regional Councils have begun to launch events where members of the public are invited into the political process at thematic workshops, conferences and a new type of thematic advisory political committees replacing the standing committees. These activities are exceptions to an otherwise rather traditional in-house policy process.

Finally, we should consider the extent to which the Regional Councils have funding and organisational capacity that can be traded into political leadership



and influence. The Regional Councils are authorised to distribute a considerable amount of funding for hospital care, but less so in other policy areas. They are no longer empowered to levy taxes, and funding is earmarked for specific policy areas, restricting the space for political priority-setting of funding between policy areas. Nevertheless, the amount of funding and organisational capacity available to the Regional Councils in the area of health care grants them a solid position in the interdependent collaboration processes with other regional actors (Højmark & Tanghøj, 2008). The situation is more difficult in other policy areas – especially in the field of regional growth and development, where the municipalities often take the lead, either individually or by forming inter-municipal partnerships (Sehested, 2011). However, the regions have to some extent been able to trade their organisational capacity into an influential position as intermediaries between the EU and the municipalities, and to promote the regions on the international scene (Fotel, 2011; Region Zealand, 2008).

In conclusion, the reform of 2007 has transformed the regional level of governance in Denmark into a full-fledged pluricentric governance arena. The political leadership capacity of politicians elected to the Regional Councils depends on the resources available to them, and their ability to use these resources to influence agenda setting and policy development in the region. The Regional Councils have the nodality to gain impact in the pluricentric governance arenas and formal authority, treasure and organisational capacity to take political leadership in the field of health care, but are otherwise in a weak position. The main problem is their weak informal authority that makes it difficult for them to recruit followers and mobilise popular support. Without such support and active backing from the public they are reduced to participants in the pluricentric policy processes, with few chances of becoming pluricentric political leaders.

#### Regional political leadership in Sweden

The intermediate level of elected government in Sweden consists of 21 units: 11 of these (in 2015) have the status of county councils (*landsting*) and 10 are regions (*regioner*). (For general overviews, see Bäck, 2011; Lidström, 2011.) They range in size from 57,000 to 2.1 million inhabitants; the average is 448,000 inhabitants. The main function of these units is health care, but they are also responsible for care of the disabled, regional cultural institutions and to some extent vocational education. The regions have additional functions, of which the most important is responsibility for regional development in the county area. Where there are county councils, this task is the responsibility of either the County Administrative Board (*länsstyrelser*), headed by a County Governor (*landshövding*), or the Regional Cooperative Council. The County Administrative Board is the central government agency at regional level and the Regional Cooperative Councils is a joint body between the county council and the municipalities in the county (Stegmann McCallion 2008). Although this mixture of solutions may appear confusing, and is striking in a country otherwise known for its uniformity and standardisation (Lidström 2010), the general tendency is for county councils to be transformed into regions: three more county councils are

expected to become regions in 2017. A parallel tendency is that responsibility for regional development policies is transferred from the County Administrative Boards to the elected regions. There were also two cases of county council amalgamations in the late 1990s, when Västra Götaland and Skåne replaced a total of five county councils.

Regional reform has been debated in Sweden since the 1960s (Krantz 2002). An attempt to initiate a large-scale regional amalgamation reform was taken by the Parliamentary Committee on Public Sector Responsibilities in 2007. It proposed that all county councils and regions should be replaced by six to nine much larger regions with major responsibility for regional development (Ansvarskommittén, 2007; Lidström, 2010). Despite strong support from almost all political parties, the proposal was vetoed by the largest party in the coalition government. In addition, it proved difficult to establish consensus among the county councils about the borders of the new regions. Nevertheless, the Social Democratic/Environmental Party government, in power from 2014, has announced plans of taking up the issue again.

Whereas traditional county-council functions like health care are mainly carried out with politicians in a leadership role as sovereign rulers, regional development functions require different kinds of skills. In the 1990s, under the combined influence of globalisation, neoliberal ideas of the competitive region and EU membership, regional policies in Sweden were changed from being a national to a regional responsibility (Gren, 2002; Olsson & Åström, 2003). The focus shifted, from equalising conditions in different parts of the country to an emphasis on the responsibility of the regions themselves to develop their assets in order to become more competitive. This included preparing regional development plans which gave the regional politicians a new role as coordinators of various local and regional actors – including municipalities, central government agencies, private interests and civil society organisations (Hörnström 2013). Apart from being traditional sovereigns, the leaders have been given a pluricentric role, and this is expressed in the conditions for exercising leadership.

First, there are extensive institutional linkages between the regional politicians and other centres of power at local and regional levels. Most county councils and regions have joint semi-independent state-owned companies for public transport that organise and subsidise buses and local trains in the area. In the county councils that set up Regional Cooperative Councils, close cooperation has been established in issues concerning regional development, culture and tourism. In addition, there are various specific local and regional cooperative arrangements, such as joint boards for cultural institutions and shared responsibility for public health. In addition, there is considerable informal cooperation between various bodies where county council/regional politicians play a role. All these bodies contribute to ensure the nodality of regional politicians. However, there is some confusion, as both the County Governor, as representative of the state, and the regional politicians may take initiatives to coordinate local and regional actors for the purpose of promoting the interests of the region.

Second, Sweden's county councils and regions enjoy considerable formal powers. As regards their capacities in relation to the central government, they are among the strongest in Western Europe (Heinelt & Bertrana, 2011). As with all Swedish local governmental bodies, they have constitutional protection: they are guaranteed significant powers, including the right to levy taxes. Their formal powers are particularly strong in the areas where they are legally entitled to make binding decisions. Responsibility for health policy, including running hospitals and health centres, is the most important here. Even the increasing share of privately provided health care is financed by public means. County councils that have been transformed into regions have additional powers to allocate resources for regional development and infrastructure.

Third, there is some variation between county councils/regions in the degree to which there is a regional political community that can be mobilised as a source of informal authority. Most regional units correspond to a regional division of Sweden that was established back in 1634. Many of them seem to have a common identity; in some cases, regional identities are almost as strong as the national identity (Westin, 2012). There are both radio and TV stations that broadcast news about regional politics. There is a radio station in each county/region, whereas TV stations typically tend to cover several counties. The printed local media have their stronghold in the medium-sized towns, although they provide regional coverage as well. Regional election campaigns are usually accorded considerable space in the media. Hence, there are possibilities for regional politicians to mobilise support.

Finally, Swedish county councils and regions have considerable financial resources and organisational capacity (Gibson & Batley, 1993; Loughlin et al., 2005). They are entitled to levy income taxes without any upper limit. Indeed, they are not required to consult central government or any other local or regional authority before making a decision, although in practice politicians think twice before raising local taxes. On average, the regional tax covers 70 percent of county council/regional revenue. Regions/county councils also receive grants from the central government; in addition there is a system of equalisation which transfers resources mainly from the Stockholm area to the parts of the country where the average age of the population is higher. Although limited by national regulation, the politicians may set priorities as to they use resources among their various tasks. They are also granted general competence to carry out functions that are not the responsibility for any other unit of government. Most of the regional/county council revenue is used to finance mandatory functions such as health care and public dental care. Particularly in the regions, there are also resources for regional development and an administrative capacity in terms of skilled personnel. However, in this field, regional politicians have a more pluricentric role, as they are dependent on generating and combining resources from other partners, such as national government, the EU structural funds, private business and municipalities. Such funding may vary greatly among regions/county councils, depending on whether they have responsibility for regional development and whether they are eligible for EU structural fund support.

However, on the whole, regional politicians have considerable funding and organisational capacities at their disposal.

In conclusion, regional politicians in Sweden combine the roles of being traditional sovereigns and pluricentric leaders. However, those limited to the county council functions of mainly health care are more traditional leaders, as they control and allocate all funding themselves. Those who are regional politicians or members of Regional Cooperative Councils must work to establish coalitions for growth, coordinating various local and regional interests and generating and combining resources. Today, regional politicians in Sweden are increasingly becoming pluricentric leaders, as more and more county councils are being transformed into regions. If larger regions are eventually established, regional politicians might become significant power-holders in a system of multi-level governance traditionally dominated by central government and the municipalities.

### Regional political leadership in Norway

Regional government in Norway has been the most contested tier of government. From 1975 the 19 counties<sup>3</sup> have been headed by directly elected County Councils, and are entitled to distribute funding between policy areas and levy taxes (Amdam et al., 2014; Monkerud, 2005; Mydske et al., 2006). The maximum taxation level is, however, regulated by the central government, and most county budgets are financed by national funding. From 1975 to 2000, counties were responsible for several important welfare services: public hospitals, public child care and childcare institutions, secondary schools, county roads, regional planning and development, and environmental/cultural heritage regulation. In the course of the past decade, counties have lost their responsibility for public hospitals, public child care and childcare institutions, which have become state responsibilities (in 2002 and 2004). Although the counties retained responsibility for one part of the school sector (secondary schools), their role has gradually changed from service-providers to *coordinators of regional development* (Baldersheim et al., 2011). This development has been strengthened by the administration reform of 2010,<sup>4</sup> which delegates to the counties greater responsibility for developing regionally differentiated policies, targeting business development and innovation to achieve regional political goals, for example by gaining greater control over regional research funds and ownership of Innovation Norway (Ot.prp. 10, 2008–2009). This reflects a change in attitude, where regional growth is increasingly conceptualised as ‘bottom-up’ *endogenous* processes (Selstad & Onsager, 2004; Hanssen et al., 2011). Counties also got greater responsibility for roads and public transport, important factors in spurring regional development. In addition they coordinate public and private actors, for example in water management (the EU Water Framework Directive), health promotion and climate-change adaptation. Stronger planning instruments have been introduced to support the counties in the role of regional development agent, for example legally binding plan-regulations and mandatory regional planning strategies. The latter idea originated in Denmark, and requires broad involvement

from stakeholders and public authorities. Norway's current conservative/populist coalition government has put local and regional structural reforms on the agenda again. The first step is a voluntary amalgamation reform, which might lead to decentralisation of tasks from the regional governments.

Nevertheless, Norway's counties lack sufficient economic incentives and organisational capacity to shoulder their responsibility for regional development.<sup>5</sup> Although regional politicians have funding through the regional income tax, the taxation level is regulated by the central authorities. Regional economic development as a *policy field* is only to a limited extent placed under the control of directly elected regional control. The major instruments for stimulating regional development and innovation are controlled by the central government and regional state offices, such as Innovation Norway, SIVA, the County Governor, which also have better administrative capacity (Hanssen et al., 2011; Normann & Isaksen, 2009). This means that the 'non-elected' have entered into regional policy, and are not always willing to be coordinated by regional politicians (Hovik & Hanssen, 2014; Sagalyn, 2007; Veggeland, 2009; Vibert, 2007). Hence, the autonomy of the counties is restricted, first and foremost by lack of economic muscle and juridical authority. This is reflected in a 2014 survey, where only 56 per cent of the regional politicians that responded considered that they had a large degree of autonomy in regional development (Hofstad & Hanssen, forthcoming 2015).

The role of coordinator implies that counties initiate and coordinate a broad range of partnerships and networks, with regional state, municipalities, business actors, labour organisations and civil society organisations. Most often, these networks coordinate the efforts of different public authorities, and some are mandatory (River Basin District Boards, Health Cooperation arenas). One reason for establishing such networks is the highly fragmented landscape of relevant public actors. For example, there exist over 30 different types of regional offices of national agencies, and few of them have harmonised their regional territorial borders with the counties (Nilsen & Langset, 2015). In addition, the 428 municipalities often create clusters. Having been given main responsibility for regional development, they also establish networks that link public and private actors. These networks and partnerships primarily involve resourceful stakeholders from the private sector, not members of the general public (Hanssen et al., 2012; Higdem & Hanssen, 2014). In other words, they are not arenas for mobilising broad collective policy-making, but involve regional elites. Nevertheless, international organisations like the OECD and the EU regard partnerships of this kind as an important instrument for enhancing regional development (OECD, 2002; Baldersheim et al., 2011).

Thus, there are extensive institutional linkages between Norway's regional politicians and regional and local elites and stakeholders that ensure the nodality of regional politicians. Regional politicians have to a certain extent stepped into the role of pluricentric leadership, as meta-governors of collaborative policy-making. According to a recent study, regional politicians report their most important tasks as being to give direction to regional development, participating in

networks and legitimising network decisions (Hofstad & Hanssen, forthcoming 2015). In the same survey, many reported that they were involved in between 10 and 20 networks, some as many as 40. However, they encounter competition in this role, as various regional offices of national sector agencies (first and foremost the County Governor) also have formal authority, financial resources and organisational capacity to act as as regional development agents.

New political organisation models support this role in Norway, and five County Councils have adopted a parliamentary model rather than the alderman model (Saxi et al., 2014). The parliamentary model gives the political executive leadership greater leeway and a more strategic role that suits the need for flexibility required by a coordination role. By having a 'government', the counties are provided with more operative politicians with decision-making competence who can participate in negotiations and decision-making at network arenas. Recent studies also show that the parliamentary model makes political responsibility and political cleavages clearer, thereby making regional politicians more accountable (Monkerud 2005; Saxi et al., 2014).

The extent to which there is a regional political community that can be mobilised as a source of informal authority might be the most troublesome aspect of regional government in Norway. As noted, this question relates to what extent there exists a regional political community to address, and what channels and platforms are available to regional politicians in their efforts to set the political agenda and mobilise support for policy solutions among the local populations. Regional political identity has traditionally been weak in Norway, and the counties have never stimulated to high political engagement among their electorates (Sandberg, 2009, Hansen & Stigen, 2012). Regional elections have the lowest voter turnout, compared to national and local elections.<sup>6</sup> This might be because the regions are too large for local identity formation, so the sense of being a political community is low (Vabo, 1995; Hansen & Stigen, 2007). Other studies argue that legitimacy of public sector organisations in Norway rests on the welfare services they produce (Fimreite, 2008; Sandberg, 2009). More diffuse coordinating responsibilities are challenging to communicate to the electorate.

Another explanation is that regional media often cover larger areas than the counties, and to a little degree contribute to the identity-forming of a polity in the individual counties. However, some studies (see Saxi et al., 2014) show that political discussions in regional media are activated by the parliamentary model, as the political landscape is more polarised. However, a more negative effect is a more closed and opaque political process, for the opposition parties and for the electorate, especially where the county government has a majority (Saxi et al., 2014). Hence, the parliamentary model can affect the ability of county politicians to exercise political leadership of collaborative policy-making in various ways. There are also examples of counties using the new regional planning strategy as an opportunity for broad collaborative policy-making, involving stakeholders and members of the general public in discussing broad questions about regional challenges, planning needs and which direction to go.

In conclusion, the portfolio of Norway's county councils, no longer with responsibility for important welfare services that the neighbouring countries still have, indicates a transformation of the political leadership role. From being traditional sovereigns 20 years ago, with responsibility for considerable welfare tasks, they are increasingly functioning as pluricentric leaders. However, the weak regional political identity felt by members of the public, the relative low legitimacy and the contested position of the regional tier, represent major challenges to the strength and legitimacy required by a strong, pluricentric leadership. Fewer service-tasks increase these challenges, as these tasks are often more fruitful for mobilising voters. Strengthening their role as regional development agents can enable, stimulate and mobilise different actors to coordinate their efforts to work in the same direction. Many of Norway's county councils are exercising this role in a way that promotes collaborative policy-making, as they have the nodality to gain impact in the pluricentric governance arenas in the field of regional development.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Although some research have been conducted that provides important insights into the role and functioning of regional governance in Scandinavia, there have been very few studies of the current conditions for exercising regional political leadership. This article puts this important question on the research agenda by offering a research framework for analysing the conditions for exercising political leadership in a pluricentric governance context. We have applied this framework to analyse the conditions for political leadership among regionally elected politicians in the wake of recent government reforms in Denmark, Sweden and Norway. Regional levels of governance emerge as highly pluricentric indeed, with the recent reforms further extending their pluricentric character. We have also indicated some noteworthy differences in the conditions for regional political leadership in the three countries.

Sweden's regional politicians enjoy more supportive conditions for exercising pluricentric political leadership than do regional politicians in Denmark and Norway. This is particularly strong in Sweden's regions (rather than in the county councils) where elected politicians are the formal leaders in regional development. Although the density of linkages to other powerful regional actors is high in all three countries, the formal and informal authority as well as the amount of fiscal resources and organisational capacity of Sweden's regional politicians is generally higher than in Denmark and Norway. The formal authority of regional politicians in Denmark is restricted to health care, and in Norway it is basically restricted to regional growth and development, including responsibility for public transport and specific roads. In comparison, the formal authorisation of Swedish politicians covers a wide range of policy areas. Also their informal authority is strong, as there are well-consolidated regional political communities that Swedish politicians can seek to mobilise, and they have access to suitable channels of communication. This also applies to Norway, but less so

to Denmark. Finally, Sweden's regional politicians have better access to funding and organisational capacity and the autonomy to apply it in ways useful for gaining influence in the pluricentric governance arena than do their colleagues in Norway and Denmark.

The results of the empirical study show that regional governance in Scandinavia is pluricentric, with very specific conditions and challenges for exercising political leadership compared to the municipal and national levels of government. This means that analysing regional political leadership requires a concept of pluricentric political leadership, and studying how this particular form of political leadership is exercised. We also need to study what leadership capacities and methods it involves, and what challenges elected politicians face as pluricentric political leaders.

Moreover, although Denmark, Sweden and Norway are similar in all having a regional level in their political systems, the position and strength of the politicians elected at this level of governance vary considerably among the three countries. This variation calls for further studies of how regional politicians in these countries exercise political leadership in practice, how the institutional conditions affect their capacity to influence regional governance processes, and what leadership strategies and toolkits succeed or fail under different institutional conditions. This article offers a first contribution to the study of political leadership in regional governance; the authors hope to have inspired others to further efforts in this field.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example the Norwegian White Papers: St.meld. no. 12 2006–2007, St.meld. no. 25 2008–2009; the Swedish White Paper: Näringsdepartementet 2007; Danish Government, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> Officially Norway has 19 *fylkeskommuner* (county municipalities), as the capital, Oslo, has status as a county municipality and as a municipality.

<sup>3</sup> Often called ‘county municipalities’.

<sup>4</sup> The reform failed, however, to merge the counties to develop fewer, stronger regions.

<sup>5</sup> On average, 49% of the budget of a county goes to secondary school services, 31% to roads and only 6% to regional development (Amdam et al., 2014: 24).

<sup>6</sup> In 2003, regional-election turnout was 55%; in 2007, 58% and in 2011, 60%; at local elections turnout was 59%, 62% and 64.5%.