

CHAPTER 7

Ambiguity with a purpose. The county governor as a multilevel actor, shaping the Norwegian Local Government Reform

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how the Norwegian Local Government Reform was coordinated across government levels from the time of its inception (Spring 2014) to when the recommendation on the alterations in the municipal structure was presented (Autumn 2016). Our main focus is the role of the 18 county governors in the process. The Norwegian county governors are civil servants with a strong position as mediators and liaisons between central and local levels. Their role is differentiated according to variations in needs and aspects in their county. During the reform process, the county governors were given a two-fold designated role, as: 1) guides for local processes that could lead to mergers between municipalities, and 2) nominators of which specific municipalities the Parliament should decide to merge. They did not receive a concrete mandate on how to handle this double role, and each county governor interpreted the role differently. Based on rich qualitative material, we present empirical evidence of the different interpretations. We conclude that the ambiguity in the mandate was a factor that made this multilevel reform possible, contrary to several historically-based conditions and presumptions. Ambiguity became an important element in the meta-governance of this multilevel reform.

Keywords: amalgamation reform, local government reform, multilevel reform, county governors, ambiguity, liaison position, guides, nominators, meta-governance.

INTRODUCTION

Reforms in multilevel systems are complicated, especially when they are initiated and decided at one level but will be implemented at another (Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2010; Aberback and Christensen, 2014). The recent Norwegian Local Government Reform (NLGR) has such features. The reform was formally initiated by the new conservative government in 2014 and decided by the Parliament in 2017. The reform had to be shaped and implemented – in one way or another – by 428 municipalities. One reform thus led to hundreds of reform attempts all over the country from 2014 to 2016 (Klausen, Askim and Vabo, 2016). In the end, the NLGR resulted in 119 municipalities merging into 47 and left the country with 356 municipalities as of 2020 (Ministry of Local Government and Modernization (MLGM), 2020).

The aim of this chapter is to look into how the NLGR was coordinated across levels, from the initiative by the Government until the recommendations of concrete mergers were given. Our focus is on how central actors can influence

a reform that must be shaped and implemented at a lower level. We consider which tools are available at the central level in such a reform process, and more importantly, whether tools could be calibrated to meet the purpose of the reform in the best possible way all over the country (Howlett, Vince and Río, 2017). To answer these questions, we will focus on the role of the county governors (CGs) in the reform process. In the process moving from the government's initiative to the Parliament's final decision, the CGs received a dedicated role as mediators between the initiating *central* level and the shaping and implementing *local* level (Fimreite and Flo, 2018).

The Norwegian CGs are civil servants but with a stronger position as liaisons between central and local levels. However, their role is differentiated according to variations in needs in their own county (Flo, 2014, 2021). In the local government reform process, the CGs were given a two-fold role by the MLGM. They had to guide potential processes leading to mergers between municipalities in their county, but they also had to nominate which mergers in the county the Parliament should decide to do (Fimreite and Flo, 2018). The Ministry provided no concrete mandate on how to exercise this dual role. As a consequence, the roles and tasks were interpreted differently by the 18 CGs (Fimreite and Flo, 2018). Our purpose is not to understand how differences in interpretations affected the local reform outcomes; we broaden the scope and look into how the CGs – by adjusting the role to local conditions and looking at what was feasible in concrete situations, given the local context and the national framework – shaped the national reform.

We will proceed in this chapter by presenting a theoretical framework for understanding the reform processes in multilevel systems and will continue by describing the NLGR more in detail. The main empirical part of the chapter is the presentation of the CGs' involvement in local reform processes as these were understood by the CGs themselves. This part is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the governors and their process guides, covering a wide range of aspects concerning the NLGR, locally and on a national basis. Thirty-five interviews (a total of 67 hours) were conducted from April to June 2016 (with the process guides) and from March to May 2017 (with the governors) and transcribed into 840 pages of full text. Due to the format and the purpose of identifying and illustrating important positions and viewpoints, which were concentrated and on an aggregated level, we have chosen to quote from the transcript without identifying the originator(s) in every single case.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Reforms in multilevel systems are often studied by using various organisational theoretical approaches (Aberback and Christensen, 2014). One school of thought in organisational theory claims that clear and well-defined goals, means, and objectives make it easier to achieve specified intentions in most organisational settings, also across levels (Christensen, Fimreite and Lægreid, 2007). A reform context like the one we are studying implies that pronounced ambitions about the meaning, the content, and the shaping of the reform must be communicated and shared from the central to the local level if the reform-attempts should resonate with the reformers' intention (Howlett, Vince and Río, 2017).

Many reforms and reform attempts in the public as well as private sectors have been studied and evaluated according to such postulates. The Danish local government reform implemented in the period from 2004 to 2007 is empirical evidence for the importance of clearness of guidelines, goals and means in the relationship between the central and local levels concerning public multilevel reforms (Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2010). The Government initiated, decided, and almost completely shaped the Danish reform at the central level (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg and Serritzlew, 2016). There was minimal room for municipalities in Denmark to interpret and make their own adjustments in the local versions of the reform (Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2010). A central template was made to fit all the mergers in the entire country. The reform process was rapid and was successfully implemented from the central level.

However, the Danish reform is, however, not the only multilevel reform with ambitions of fast and successful implementation and relying on clear goals and contents (Christensen, Fimreite and Lægreid, 2007; Crespy and Vanheuverzwijn, 2017; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Zahariadis and Exadaktylos, 2016). Unlike the Danish reform, many of those reforms were less effective than expected, given the clarity of goals and political support from the central level. Rather than focusing on the fact that these reforms ended up less successfully than expected, some authors examined why they did not become total failures and attributed that to the fact that there was enough ambiguity in the process. This ambiguity made it possible to handle the local stress the reform created in the organisation.

Studying reforms in higher education in Greece, Zahariadis and Exadaktylos (2016) concluded as follows: "Ambiguity is often essential in public policy because disparate coalitions need to be built and supporters must declare victory, each perhaps for his/her own reasons. This ambiguity provides room for interpretations to those who must put laws into practice, leading to contingent strategies of implementations" (p. 64). Matland (1995) claimed that when ambiguity is low and the conflict over the reform goals is bitter and high, compliance

is contested, and political power determines the outcome. However, Zahariadis, and Exadaktylos also claimed that when ambiguity is high and the conflict over the goals is equally high, then the strength of the local coalitions shapes the outcome. The strategy that turns out to be successful is therefore likely to vary, because reforms, being both redistributive and altering the status quo, generate conflict and ambiguity (Zahariadis and Exadaktylos, 2016).

The same argument is found in studies of reforms at the European level. Crepsy and Vanheuverzwijn (2017) argued that to "... govern through ambiguity can be a source of power" (p. 95). To emphasise this, they cited Mahoney and Thelen (2010), who "... consider the ambiguity of rules as the starting point for processes of interpretation, debate, and contestation" (p. 11). Crepsy and Vanheuverzwijn (2017) added that ambiguity opens the way to incremental change, asserting that "...ambiguity [is conceived] more as the outcome of power struggles among actors taking the form of an untidy policy bricolage rather than as the result of a clear foreseen strategy from specific actors" (p. 95).

Ambiguity is, however, not always constructive and can be a rather "... risky political weapon ..." (Crepsy and Vanheuverzwijn 2017:96). Citing Jegen and Merand (2014) and their studies of European energy and defence policies, the authors found that ambiguity is efficient in creating an agreement within a coalition of actors only if it is embedded in an institutional opportunity structure. They define such a structure as "...[a] formal-legal context that actors can fold into their strategic repertoire of ideas..." (pp. 2–3).

In this chapter, we will follow this line of thought and ask if the dual role the CGs were assigned in the NLGR represented a sort of ambiguity that made it possible to handle the reform locally by allowing interpretations, debates, and adaptations to local situations and coalitions, thereby making incremental changes possible. As already stated, the CG is a rather distinct institutional structure in the Norwegian multilevel system. The dual role and two-fold mandate the CGs received in the reform process created an opportunity embedded in the reform itself. If the CGs' roles can be understood in this way, what seems to be a huge paradox in the implementation process of the NLGR turns out to be what really made this reform attempt more successful than previous reforms that aimed to merge municipalities in Norway. This can serve as new and additional evidence of ambiguity as a successful coordination strategy in a multilevel system and we can, as Egeberg and Trondal stated it, "...not only learn about why public governance happens the way it does, but also contribute to developing a toolkit for how public governance processes may be deliberately shaped through organizational design" (2018, p. 2). We will focus on how the CGs interpreted their roles and chose their strategies, and how the room for ambiguity turned out to be important. Egeberg and Trondal (2018:2) labelled

the organisational design of a reform process as meta-governance. We will not discuss whether the design of the reform process we are studying was a foreseen strategy from any central actors. However, the meta-governance of the NLGR as evidenced is still important to us.

THE NORWEGIAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

PRECONDITIONS AND DESIGN

Norwegian municipalities have multiple functions. Dag Ingvar Jacobsen has discussed the Norwegian local government system (2020) and pointed out four distinct roles for the municipalities: 1) they are self-governed political bodies, 2) they are executive bodies in a national governance system, 3) they are local service providers, and 4) they are territorial units. The NLGR is part of a long tradition, and one of many efforts to strengthen the capacity of the Norwegian municipal system (Flo 2005; Klausen, Askim and Vabo, 2016; Fimreite and Flo, 2017; Kjærgård, Houlberg, Blom-Hansen, Vabo and Sanberg, 2020).

When the Solberg Government first revealed its reform ambitions, it also stated that it wanted to ensure a broad, parliamentary foundation for the reform (Sundvollen Declaration, 2013, Prop 96 S, 2016–17, p. 1). When the reform was formally launched in July 2014, it seemed as if this strategy had succeeded. In addition to the parties in Government (Conservatives and the Progress Party), and its collaborating parties (Liberals and the Christian Democrats), the Social Democrats agreed to the reform's aims. In total, these parties filled 151 of the 169 seats in Parliament. However, this reform coalition crumbled over the years, especially since the Social Democrats, and later the Christian Democrats, claimed that the reform took a path with which they could not agree. When Parliament voted on the reform in June 2017, some of the mergers were agreed upon only by a narrow margin (Stortinget 2017; discussion and voting; pp. 3871–3951). Regarding the design of the reform, there is a mixed impression. It included certain “hard” tools, e.g., in the shape of financial incentives. But generally, it was branded as a “soft” reform, especially through an organisational model that gave the impression that this was a pronounced bottom-up reform (Prop 96 S, 2016–17). The municipalities were simply invited by the Minister of Local Government “to participate in processes with the aim to assess and clarify whether it is desirable to merge with neighbouring municipalities” (press release from the Ministry, July 3, 2014). In other words, the reform objects, the municipalities themselves, were given the de facto responsibility to carry out the reform.

In modelling the reform in such a way, it manifested what was stressed as an absolute political premise for the reform: that it should be founded on a *premise of voluntarism*. The reform coalition emphasised the necessity that the municipalities' participation in merger processes was on "a real voluntary basis." If the municipalities concluded – after a thorough, local process, "following a comprehensive assessment and after having obtained views from its citizens" – that there should be no merger now, that conclusion had to be respected. The majority also stated, however, that exceptions to this "principle of volunteering" might be relevant "in very special situations where individual municipalities must not be able to stop changes that are appropriate based on regional interests" (Rec. S. 300 S, 2013–14:42).

In reality, divergent interpretations of this principle of volunteering constituted the very core of the conflicts emerging in connection to the reforms. From our interviews, the following questions arose: What should be "voluntary?" Did it refer to local processes or to local decisions, or both? And should "voluntarism" simply be a vague guideline, or something close to an absolute premise?

Throughout the reform period, no municipality could be certain that their policy choices would remain uncontested. The political leadership in the Ministry would never specify the "range of voluntarism." Instead in its rhetoric, it stressed what the concept did not include – for instance, the right to stay uninvolved from the beginning. In fact, the Ministry claimed on several occasions that there was no escape from this reform. In retrospect, it seems evident that no one, including the Minister, knew the exact content and range of the premise of voluntarism, neither as a starting point nor while the reform progressed. Our data indicates that this was first clarified in the summer of 2017, and then as a product, when it was evident which solutions the majority in Parliament actually could agree on and based on the outcome of the local processes and the administrative recommendations.

One striking feature of the NLGR is the major gap between its judicial and political preconditions. The Local Government Boundaries Act of 2001 states that local authorities have the right to express their opinion, but central state authorities are able to change the municipal structure as they wish. However, the reformers' real political scope for action was much narrower. This not only had to do with the parliamentary situation after 2013, and the Government's need for legitimacy and a broad political settlement (e.g., to minimize local party-based resistance towards the reform), but also with a combination of basic structural and historical premises. In a Scandinavian comparison, Norway sticks out with its politically potent periphery (Stein, 2019; Eidheim and Fimreite, 2020), and its tradition for a *de facto* local power to "decide on municipal boundaries", dating back to the 19th Century. The reputation – after

the only large municipal amalgamation reform in Norwegian history, during the first half of the 1960s – was that this was a “forced reform”, in the sense that it violated the very principle of local self-government. Consequently, it has constituted a negative reference for all later municipal reforms (Fimreite and Flo, 2017). In 1995, a broad parliamentary majority made a resolution on principle that municipalities should have the right to veto all structural changes that are in conflict with municipal decisions or the result of local referendums (Hansen, 2016: 68). In this light, the condition of voluntarism in the NLGR could partly be seen as some sort of “resignation towards the realities”, and partly as an expression of an ideologically or principally motivated protection of the integrity of local democracy.

THE COUNTY GOVERNOR AS A REFORM TOOL

On July 3, 2014, Norway’s 18 CGs were given a two-fold designated assignment in the NLGR. Firstly, they should guide the municipalities in their counties throughout the “local” phase of the reform. Words like “implement”, “facilitate”, “supervise”, and “coordinate” were also used in policy documents when describing the CGs’ roles in the local processes (Prop. 95 S, 2013–14; Prop. 96 S; 2016–17). The deadline for settling on voluntary amalgamations – and to benefit from generous reform grants – was June 30, 2016. Secondly, knowing the full results of the local processes, the governors should give their recommendation to the Ministry on alterations in the municipal structure. This assignment as a nominator should end by October 1, 2016.

The fact that the CGs held important roles in the NLGR was in many ways obvious, most of all because this assignment could be seen as a natural extension of the CGs’ portfolio of tasks. In principle, the CG serves the entire central government administration. It is a cross-level mediator and liaison through a wide range of general, cross-sectorial and specific sectorial tasks, mostly in the shape of monitoring, supervision, and guidance. Its main function – at least for the last four decades – is to play the role of a municipal-oriented coordination agency (Flo 2014, 2021). The institution has the regional administrative responsibility for central government tasks of particular relevance to municipal activities and plays a multitude of potentially conflicting roles as both a helper and a chastiser, a defender of municipal self-government and a guardian of national objectives. The CG fills the important function as the central government’s main expert on the municipalities, in possession of detailed knowledge about the situation in the districts, and is thus a provider of key insights for the development of central government policy for municipal activities (Flo 2014, 2021).

The CGs faced different dilemmas due to the premise of local voluntarism – or to be more precise, due to the ambiguity connected to the premise (Fimreite and Flo, 2018). In the role as a guide, they had to decide how and to what degree they should get involved in local processes, without violating the local integrity and the local process ownership and failing to fulfil their duties towards their principal (i.e., the Ministry) as well as the reform’s aims and conditions, as defined by Parliament. In their role as a nominator, other questions arose: To what degree should their recommendations be based on the results from the local amalgamation processes? Should the CG be able to deviate from local decisions? In the following paragraphs, we will examine in more detail how the CGs perceived their assignment and handled their dilemmas, both as guides and as nominators.

THE COUNTY GOVERNOR AS A GUIDE IN LOCAL NLGR PROCESSES

The assignment as a guide – or, as expressed in 2014, as a “facilitator of good local processes and as a coordinator” (MLGM 2014) – was never regulated in much detail. The Ministry thus entrusted the CGs with a high degree of freedom to choose how they would organise and carry out their tasks. Our interview data identifies three important questions, based on how the CGs operationalised and solved this assignment. This information will be presented and discussed more in detail here.

How involved and how visible should the county governors be in local processes?

The CGs generally agreed that the freedom they had to choose how to carry out this assignment was appropriate. With hundreds of local processes nationwide – some high and some low on energy and on level of conflict; some involving only two and some involving a large group of municipalities; some of the processes “competing” with each other, promoting mutually exclusive solutions, – something like a standard solution would be counterproductive. The CGs also generally approved the centrally defined condition of local reform ownership. Their main role in this phase of the national reform was as helpers or assistants. They were there to serve the municipalities, help them interpret regulations, subsidy schemes, and so on. Some CGs admitted they were too persistent in the initial phases of the reform and too eager to “get the processes going.” Still, they generally found it unproblematic to “straighten up” municipalities that slowed down or abstained from taking part in local processes; they perceived this as part of their mandate as guides. Most CGs agreed that local reform ownership meant they should abstain from expressing their own preferences

regarding merger alternatives. During the reform, the Ministry clarified that processes aiming at amalgamation should not be stopped or undermined, even though the CG considered them unrealistic or undesirable. Some CGs found it problematic, although, just to applaud all local processes. They wanted to be able to abort “suboptimal solutions”, and some admitted they had done this in order to promote more realistic local alternatives. Some CGs even expressed a desire to state what would be “the best solution” in individual cases and draw a map of the “ideal” municipal structure.

For most CGs, “local reform ownership” also presupposed that the CG should try to avoid too much public attention. Essentially, representatives of the office should not steal the limelight from the mayors! One ideal, often expressed, was that the CG should be geared to demand: representatives of the CG should not “invite themselves in”, but instead wait until being invited to council meetings, to town hall meetings, etc., and the CGs should carefully consider the necessity before interfering with public debate. Still, they all participated in political and public meetings, and some were not reluctant when they found, “It is our duty to front and commend the reform.”. Some CGs interpreted local “reform ownership” as a demand to withdraw from the local processes when they were “politicised”; for instance, when municipalities were negotiating on the conditions for amalgamations, or when municipalities made real policy choices, or when the party-political element of the deliberations was predominant. Still, some interviews indicate that not all CGs were as reserved when hidden from the public eye. They also got involved in politically delicate questions, in the shape of political-strategic guidance to mayors and other local political actors, to help them get out of deadlocks, etc. “When the mayors despair, they call us.”

Although the CGs approved of the condition of local reform ownership, it had different implications for different CGs. For some, it was a clear signal that they should be reserved and regard themselves mainly as facilitators. Some claimed that being too involved in specific local processes would violate the premise of voluntarism, and thus be a manifestation of disloyalty. However, as other CGs claimed, they could not be indifferent to the outcome of the local processes. These CGs argued that the role as a driving force was partly anchored in the reform assignment, and partly in the general County Governor Instruction.

It is important to point out that these differences in opinion concerning how involved and visible the CGs should be do not necessarily reflect ideological positions, or different degrees of reform sympathy or antipathy. The basic structural, financial, and political preconditions, including the political culture, vary from county to county. Interviews reveal that the CGs’ scope of action also differed: a “visible” and active CG was not only possible, but also

expected in some counties, while a “visible” and active CG could be regarded as a provocation in others and result in the release of counterforces, a recoil effect harming the reform. This illustrates that the “rules of the game” differed from county to county, which also explains why this part of the assignment could not be regulated in much detail in the first place.

To what degree was or should the county governors be tools for reform consistency and impact?

In theory, the Ministry could have given the CGs informal but intimate instructions on how to implement the reform’s main objectives. Nevertheless, the overall impression is that the CGs experienced informal central government control only to a small degree, including signals on expectations generally or when these concerned single cases. In fact, several governors regarded the lack of clear instructions – or, as some specified, the reform’s unclear framework conditions – as a basic problem, both for the municipalities and for the CGs as reform guides.

The CGs described the Ministry – the reform’s administrative head – as competent and obliging; still, it was more interested in gathering the governor’s experiences than in controlling the agenda. The reform apparatus developed a well-functioning system of information exchange, and the ministerial reform secretariat willingly aided and guided the CGs when it came to “technical” questions. But concerning politically controversial questions, it was difficult or impossible to get a straight answer. “You better try to sort this out yourselves”, was the standard expression from the Ministry, some claimed.

It seems fair to say that reform coordination on a national level in the “local” phase of the reform was mostly a result of collaborative talk and experience transfer between the CGs and their reform advisors, communicating on digital platforms and through occasional meetings on both a regional and national level. They made calibration attempts, concerning both their role as guides and their more pressing, future role as a nominator; this was without much success. The CGs had to recognise that they approached the reform assignments differently, and that the course of the local processes also differed highly from one county to another.

The CGs explained the differences in how the reform manifested itself in different counties as a combination of several factors: the vague central reform management (which was again explained by the unsteady parliamentary support for the reform), the diversity between the counties (regarding a wide range of basic conditions), and also with different, personal approaches, attitudes, and assessments among the personnel on various CG offices. However, the CGs were

divided on the question of whether this was a problem. Some said that the huge geographical differences under which the reform was carried out undermined the reform's legitimacy. They valued their freedom to a certain point, but filling the vacuum created by the lack of overall reform governance made them uncomfortable. Others had no qualms regarding the high degree of freedom, referring specifically to the impossibility of implementing the reform in a streamlined way, or generally to the value of widely defined assignments. "We should not demand more detail management from our principals." According to some of these CGs, a more standardised, "middle-of-the-road" approach would have restrained the processes in the most "proactive" counties and been too provocative and thereby counterproductive in the most reform-reluctant or aloof counties.

Is the municipalities' legitimacy towards the county governor relevant to how and to what degree the county governor should comply with the assignment?

The interviews and observations during national gatherings of representatives of the CG offices show that local or municipal legitimacy towards the office was an important consideration for most governors. They felt their general reputation or goodwill was at stake, due to the reform. How the governors conducted the assignments as guides, and to a higher degree as nominators (see below), could harm the relationship of trust. Consequently, it could also harm the offices' numerous municipal-related functions. "Remember, we are going to live with these municipalities afterwards", as some of them emphasised. The concern for their legitimacy had different implications for different governors. Some of them admitted that it affected the way they performed their roles; it made them more withdrawn and reserved, more reluctant to interfere and risk criticism for being too heavy-handed. In other words, their wish for reputational damage control influenced the way they handled their reform assignment.

The governors that were most concerned with their legitimacy felt that they were under dual fire. On the one hand, they could not risk provoking the municipalities, but on the other hand, they felt they had to please the Ministry and Parliament. On the central level, they judged that some actors would be displeased if the CGs "went too far", others would be equally displeased if they acted "too defensively." If a governor as a nominator ended up recommending non-voluntary mergers that Parliament rejected, the governor would lose face in the municipalities, or worse: the CG could be held "responsible for the use of force!"

A minority of the CGs rejected the thought that legitimacy and the general relationship with the municipalities were highly relevant factors during the

reform. “The municipalities understand that we have an assignment to carry out”, or “If we give this any weight, we have misunderstood our role. A County Governor should not think like a politician” were two of the reactions when this group was confronted with the potential legitimacy problem. These CGs believed that their legitimacy would not be harmed if they stuck to professional assessments and stayed loyal to their duties as civil servants and representatives of central government.

To sum up, the CGs themselves had to face and solve certain dilemmas in their role as NLGR guides, due to the fact that this assignment was never streamlined, even by their own “calibration attempts.” This could be claimed to have undermined the reform’s consistency and have contributed to the geographical heterogeneity in the outcome of local reform processes. But the freedom the CGs were given to choose how to play their role was nevertheless a natural consequence of the general premise of local voluntarism, and also provided the NLGR with a valuable elasticity or flexibility. The CGs, knowing “their” municipalities and the local political landscape, could thus concentrate on finding the balancing point in their specific county – to assess how and to what degree they could involve and promote the reform’s goals without violating local political integrity and the premise of local ownership to the reform processes, and thus undermining the reform’s legitimacy. For local processes to succeed, the active contribution from parties who were sceptical of or opposed to the NLGR as a national reform was often essential. The reform format allowed room for these parties to value and celebrate their local victories, and to downplay each single merger’s contribution to the NLGR in general.

THE COUNTY GOVERNOR AS A NOMINATOR IN THE NATIONAL NLGR PROCESS

A new phase of the municipal reform started when the local processes reached their deadline at the end of June 2016. During the next three months the CGs would, as formulated in their assignment, “independently do an assessment of all municipal decisions, and give advice on the future municipal structure in the county” (MLGM, 2016). Although the reform went from one phase to another, and the CGs had to “change mode”, the assignments as guides and nominators were interwoven in practice. Most CGs (and probably many local politicians) had their minds fixed on the final recommendation throughout the reform. On the other hand, the content of the recommendation clearly would have to be heavily influenced by the experiences from the local reform processes, and of course, the outcomes of these processes.

The product of the local processes was highly diverse, ranging from multiple voluntary amalgamations in some counties to zero in five counties. Consequently, the premises for the governors' recommendations were correspondingly different. Interviews with representatives for the CGs showed that many felt frustrated with the municipalities, some referring to a local lack of will to "accept the reality." Local politicians let feelings take precedence over reason; they conducted local, advisory referendums on insufficient grounds, but still complied with the result (in most cases, a popular preference for status quo); they made agreements on amalgamation without any intention to implement, etc. At least in some cases, this frustration seems to have legitimated recommendations contrary to local decisions.

Our interviews with the CGs in Spring 2017 revealed that they interpreted the conditions for their assignment as nominators quite differently, reflecting the basic ambiguity of the reform format. Combining interview data with the content of the recommendations, we divided the CGs into three groups, reflecting the profound differences in how they understood their assignment:

Group 1: "Unadulterated voluntarism": This group includes counties like Hedmark, Hordaland, and Vestfold. These CGs did not recommend any amalgamation not rooted in (mutual) local decision. Still, this was a highly differentiated group when it came to results: Vestfold, the "front-runner" of the reform, started with 14 municipalities and ended up with six, while none of the 22 municipalities in Hedmark amalgamated. The group was also divided when it came to how they argued for their approach. Some claimed that local amalgamations could only be legitimate, and thereby functional, if they originated from local, voluntary decisions. Others argued that local voluntarism – meaning local decision-making power – was a premise for this reform; a premise that they happened to disagree on, but with which they felt obliged to comply. There were also other arguments for basing their recommendations solely on local decisions. One CG argued that use of force was not necessary in his county, since the local amalgamation processes had been so fruitful – if the local processes had turned out worse, he gladly would have "used force."

Group 2: "Unadulterated professionalism": This group includes counties like Akershus, Møre og Romsdal, and Troms. These governors suggested several amalgamations not founded in local decisions, stressing that they were a professional body conducting a professional assignment with a "professionalism" mainly based on the so-called "criteria for a good municipal structure" (developed by a governmental expert committee; Vabo et al., 2014), and rooted in their own expertise on/intimate knowledge of "their" municipalities. This does not

mean that the outcomes of local processes were irrelevant – they happily integrated local decisions as parts of their recommendations when municipalities decided on mergers – but in principle, the local decision was only one variable amongst many when the CG weighed the arguments. Some of the CGs argued that the reform’s premise of voluntarism was not relevant for them in the role as a nominator. The premise was relevant until June 30, 2016, during local negotiations on “whom they should marry” (and, as a consequence, relevant for the CG in the role as guide). It would be relevant again after October 1, 2016, in the process leading up to the summer of 2017 when national politicians would decide on whether they should obey or ignore local decisions. As condition suppliers to the national reform, the municipalities themselves represented “voluntarism” through their decisions, while the CGs represented “professionalism” through their recommendations. It was up to the MPs to decide whether they should listen to the “voluntary” or the “professional” voices.

Group 3: “Limited force”: This group includes counties like Sogn og Fjordane, Nordland, and Rogaland. These governors derived their recommendations directly from local decisions, but also proposed a limited number of “forced” amalgamations – maybe only one or two each. These CGs felt torn between what they considered incompatible demands (and the threat of legitimacy loss), constantly waiting for some sort of a “clarification.” This clarification never came; therefore, CGs in this group regarded it as crucial to recommend something “realistic” that might actually be agreed upon in Parliament in the summer of 2017. They all seem to have believed that the parliamentary majority would not be willing to accept substantial deviations from local voluntarism, but it might be willing to grant each county a small “quota of force.”

Overall, the diversity in how the CGs solved their assignment as guides had not given rise to much public or political outcry. The diversity in how they carried out their task as nominators, on the other hand, could not be hidden from the public. In the public debate, the differences were often interpreted as a clear sign that the individual CG’s personal opinion or political party preference tipped the scales. One of the first studies of the reform focused on how the CGs dealt with conflicting pressures as nominators and also stated that the individual CG’s own, personal interpretations and convictions determined the outcome. This is a reason to ask whether it is right to leave so much political power to an administrative institution when the leader’s personal discretion could end up making the decisions (Glomsrud, 2017).

Still, we would argue that all three approaches were possible and expressed loyalty, given the ambiguity of the assignment. A more unambiguous assignment would have represented a great relief for some governors, but this might

have had other disadvantages for the reform. If all CGs were instructed to base their recommendations solely on local decisions, and effectively had been forced to advise against other solutions, it would have weakened the central politicians' ability to do their own assessments. In reality, a "positive" recommendation from the CG in a single case was something close to an absolute precondition for a "positive" decision on merger in Parliament. On the contrary, if all CGs were instructed to ignore or downgrade the value of local decisions and emphasise their independent, professional judgment, this might increase the level of conflict and weaken the overall legitimacy for the reform.

There were disadvantages to the different approaches to the assignment as guides, but these also provided some sort of "balance" for the bottom line. The NLGR was not a complete success and not a complete failure. It represented a deviation, but only a moderate one, from the premise of voluntarism, and was thus acceptable for the great majority. This illustrated a general paradox in the NLGR: given the reform's fragile, political basis, too much success could increase the risk of failure.

AMBIGUITY WITH A PURPOSE – CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we have discussed how the dual role the CGs were assigned in the NLGR could represent the ambiguity needed to handle a national reform at the local level in a multilevel system. We have shown how the CGs themselves and their collaborators perceived the scope for interpretations and debates, and how adaptations to local situations and coalitions made incremental changes possible. We have also pointed out that by adjusting the content of the role to local conditions and what was feasible in the concrete situations given the local context and the national framework, the CGs did not just handle the local reform attempts, but they even shaped the national reform.

It is not difficult to find expressions of disappointment around the reform-outcome of the NLGR among actors supporting the reform's aims as well. Even though there are fewer municipalities in Norway now than in 2014, the majority of municipalities still have less than 5,000 inhabitants. The principle of a generalist municipality system (i.e., that all municipalities should play the same role as executors of national policy) is thus no easier to maintain than before the reform (MLGM, 2018).

The reform processes might even, as some feared, have damaged the CGs' legitimacy. This applies to both individual CGs and the institution as a whole (Fimreite and Flo, 2018). There is criticism that CGs have been both "too loyal" and not "loyal enough" and that they have been "too activist" or "too relaxed." Our interviews show that even some of the respondents expressed discontent

with the strategy chosen by central government for the implementation for the reform and for the “rules” of the reform in this strategy. They appear to claim that if national politicians had abandoned the premise of voluntarism, established clear assignments to the CGs, and been more exact about what they expected from these assignments, the result would have been a more consistent and extensive national reform. This criticism implies that the reform’s built-in ambiguity regarding multilevel coordination represents the very core of the problem with the NLGR.

However, if we look closer at the national reform outcome, NLGR has to be declared as a reform of historical proportions in a Norwegian context. Reducing the numbers of municipalities by 17% can also be considered impressive. In spite of the heterogeneity regarding the process and the result, this has proved to be a national reform. From our empirical data, we would argue that the ambiguity we have discovered in the multilevel structure expressed by the CGs’ interpretation of their role in the reform was in reality an important step toward this. The ambiguity made the reform possible across levels and mitigated the effect of the historical and political conditions and the differences between the counties’ needs and possibilities.

Although the aims and ambitions of the reform initially seemed to be agreed upon by the majority in the Parliament, this resulted neither in a broad political coalition at the central level supporting the reform unconditionally nor regarding means, objectives, or implementation. It was politically impossible to abandon the premise of voluntarism. What was possible, though, was to avoid being too specific about how this premise should be included in the reform. Such a vagueness allowed an ambiguity that gave enough flexibility to adjust the reform to local preconditions and inspired (or frightened) the municipalities into action. The reform design made it too risky for a single municipality to opt to “wait for the reform to pass.” We maintain that the detected ambiguity in the reform layout made the decisive difference between a real bottom-up reform and a quasi-bottom-up reform. The number of mergers (as a proxy for reform results) was disappointing in some counties. In other counties, the results were more moderate, but in some places, there was an impressive result. Those results would not have been accomplished if it had not been in the context of a national reform with allowance for local adjustments.

The reform’s moderate success was by no means determined by the reform format and the reform strategy alone. It could have turned out as either more successful or more of a failure. To make the reform more successful, the initial reform coalition at the central level needed to be more persistent throughout the process. The local support for the reforms was fragile, and the NLGR could easily have been affected much more by the growing political discontent with

the government's alleged "centralism" after 2014 (Stein, 2019; Eidheim and Fimreite, 2020).

However, given the parliamentary situation in 2014 and the politically relevant historical experiences, both a stricter "commando structure" and a more consistent laissez-faire strategy would have been counterproductive. Ambiguity was, given these circumstances, a risky strategy, but the alternative strategies would probably have been even more risky. A reform with a clearer top-down approach – lacking, or at least with a clearly moderated premise of voluntarism – would probably have increased the level of conflict, not only across party lines in Parliament, but also between the same parties at different governance levels. A reform with a clearer bottom-up approach and a stronger premise of voluntarism would have implied fewer local incentives and would have gained forces working for status quo.

The ambiguity we have discussed here represented a balancing point in this reform process and gave energy to the NLGR. The right institutional context must be present in order for ambiguity to result in such energy. We argue that the CGs were what Jegen and Merand (2014:2–3) called "an institutional opportunity structure" in this reform. It is no doubt that the formal-legal context for the CGs enfolded into their strategic repertoire of ideas helped the reform come through. The CG institution – with its distinctive, wide-set of roles and tasks, its close relationship with the municipalities, and its general ability to implement national policy to highly varying local contexts – became an important precondition for the NLGR. The CGs' reform assignment reflected the institution's formal role but also their diversity of approaches. The CGs became a differentiated reform tool for Government; a tool that shaped the national reform. Using organisational theoretical terms, the institutional opportunity structure the CGs represented in this reform turned out to be an important meta-governance feature of the Norwegian Local Government Reform.

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