

CHAPTER 15

Contained
regionalism:
Towards a Nordic
model

Jon P. Knudsen

ABSTRACT

Geography matters to politics regarding the formation of political institutions. One of the founding fathers of Nordic political science, Stein Rokkan, insisted on labelling geography as a main constituent of any political system. In the Nordic scene, geography has come to be identified with issues like nation-building, electoral behaviour, welfare distribution, demographic sparsity and regional policies. From an institutional perspective, the Nordic type of demographic sparsity has even been accorded a specific objective (Objective 6) for regional policy funding within the EU. The geographical steering system is hinged on a strong state and strong municipalities, leaving little relative space for the kind of (quasi) federal regionalism so often found in other corners of Europe, with a possible exception of the Sami population in the northernmost part of the Fennoscandian peninsula. Still, regions aspiring to become nation states are found – Greenland, The Åland Islands and the Faroe Islands. While the geographical centre–periphery dimensions are variously articulated within each of the Nordic countries, the political system is considered legitimate to cope with these dimensions for all of them. Attempts at far-reaching reforms to strengthen the regional level within the political steering systems at the expense of the state or the municipalities have thus not been very successful. This phenomenon, it is suggested, should be labelled contained regionalism.

Keywords: contained regionalism, Nordic models, nation-building, geography, regional steering systems, Europe of regions.

INTRODUCTION

Geography matters to politics regarding the formation of political institutions. One of the founding fathers of Nordic political science, Stein Rokkan, insisted on labelling geography as a main constituent of any political system. The dedication on the colophon of one of his classical books, edited by S.M. Lipset (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments: Cross-national Perspectives*, states that this position was derived from more than academic insight for both: “To our fathers, defenders of the periphery”. In the Nordic scene, geography has come to be identified with issues like nation-building, electoral cleavage, welfare distribution, demographic sparsity and regional policies.

The term *regional* is being used in many ways according to discipline, subject and scale, and then dealing with patterns, phenomena and processes taking place at a level subordinated to something else. In international business stud-

ies, entire continents may be labelled regional, while the most common usage elsewhere is to refer to subnational, but supralocal, levels of analysis. However, the notion of subnational should not lead us to think of *regional* as something qualitatively less important. Rokkan's insistence on offering regional processes a cornerstone in his theories of European nation-building (Flora, 1999; Rokkan & Urwin, 1983) should be illustrative. Hence, his legacy has been developed and revitalised by following generations of academics and policy advisors (Diani, 2000; Stein 2019; Todd, 1990) who have come to terms with understanding the many facets of European regionalism and, more specifically, the concept of a "Europe of regions" (Anderson, 2018; Magone, 2003). Historically, Europe has oscillated between supranationalism and localism to find its institutional equilibria. This chapter looks at the ways in which the processes of institutionalisation of the term regional has fared in the Nordic countries with special attention to the Norwegian case. I will particularly place emphasis on coming to terms with why a need that Rokkan (1967) points out as so crucial to nation-building processes has come to be institutionalised with so little emphasis on establishing a strong second tier in the countries in question.

In the next sections, the historical background is presented for the theme of the chapter, which then moves on to explain the relevant discussions over the status of the regional level before progressing to the present situation, which offers a picture of the regional level as being the least developed in the Nordic political systems. This leads to the conclusion: the paradox of contained regionalism. While the regional political agendas remain strong, their expressions have been voiced and absorbed through the national political steering system, weakening the need for a strongly institutionalized regional level.

THE NORDIC BACK-DROP

Technically, Paasi & Zimmerbauer (2011, p.166) define the institutionalization of regions as the "condensation of path-dependent political and regional economic geographies as part of a wider spatial and social division of labour and power relations". Rokkan & Urwin (1983, p.141) offer a model in which these processes are understood as a ladder with stages leading from mere identity building to full separation, often accompanied by a concomitant escalation of conflict and violence (Stein, 2019, p.8). If regional interests and tensions form such an important backdrop to Nordic nation-building, one should logically expect them to be saliently institutionalized. However, the opposite seems to be the case.

The Nordic political steering model is normally described as a three-tier model, meaning that it has three democratically elected political levels, the state,

the region (*amt, fylke, landsting, region*) and the municipality (*kommun(e)*). More specifically, this model holds true for Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Iceland, with its smaller population, has a two-tier system consisting of state and municipalities, while Finland could be said to have a two-and-a-half-tier system with indirectly elected regional assemblies. In the case of the three-tier states, we should note that the pivotal axis of the system runs between the state and the municipalities. These were the first to be established as democratically elected, and these are the levels endowed with the strongest competencies (Christensen, 2003). Accordingly, the geographic steering chain is illustrated as an hourglass with the regional level making up the narrower part (Hörnström, 2013). This hourglass form has theoretically been argued as the outcome of the unitary state controlling the regional voice. Regional institutions are missing, and the periphery is, so to speak, integrated in the infrastructure of the unitary state, in the Norwegian case specifically by the way in which the electoral systems serve to favour the various geographic peripheries (Aarebrot, 1982; Rommetvedt, 1992).

THE STRONG STATE

The strong state is normally taken as a given in the analyses of the Nordic steering models. Dosenrode and Halkier (2004, pp. 201–202), when editing an anthology on Nordic regions faced with EU policy initiatives and challenges, conclude that the “all-important frame of reference remains the nation-state”, and that the field left for regionalism is reserved for pragmatic and economically-driven purposes only. Blom-Hansen et al. (2012) and Christensen (2003) come to the same conclusion; the state has the upper hand. The geographical steering system is hinged on a strong state and strong municipalities, leaving little relative space to various kinds of (quasi) federal regionalism. But this picture has nuances. The institutionalization of Sami interests in the northernmost part of the Fenno-Scandic peninsula is one such example (Henriksen, 2009). Regions aspiring to become nation states are further examples: Greenland, the Åland Islands and the Faroe Islands (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Grydehøj, 2016; Hepburn, 2014). Furthermore, the degree to which the state has the upper hand may vary among the countries in question. While historically the geographical centre-periphery dimensions have been differently articulated within each of the Nordic countries (Hansen, 1972; Mønnesland 1995), the political systems have also been considered legitimate to cope with these dimensions. Attempts at far-reaching reforms strengthening the regional level within the political steering systems at the expense of the state or the municipalities have thus not been very successful. In this respect, historical analyses of which factors

conditioned Norway to adopt a more regionally attentive, though state-centred, governing style than Sweden (Hansen, 1972; Strand, 1976), together with later cross-Nordic analyses coming to similar conclusions (Foss et al., 2010; Lind, 2013), are relevant to understand internal and cross-Nordic debates on how to deal with contemporary regional challenges (Knudsen, 2020).

The origins of the strong Nordic state emanate from the medieval and later state-building processes (Knudsen & Rothstein, 1994). One of the foremost traits in these processes was the need for prospective heads of state to control and preferably outmanoeuvre regionally based competitors or protesters. In historical times, the regional level was dealt with as a state affair echoing complicated nation-building processes coming to terms with landed aristocracies, the Catholic church (until the mid-16th century) and other alternative sources of national political power. In summary, early Nordic state-building processes served to contain regional power bases and to tame their political ambitions (Berg & Oscarsson, 2013; Kaspersen, 2004). The end of the Napoleonic wars marked the transition to the subsequent political evolvement of the 19th and 20th centuries, resulting in the processes of modern nation-building and municipal formation. This therefore offered the present picture of a bifurcated system – the modern state and its concomitant local partner, the empowered municipality (Haveri, 2015). In this system, the regional level is split into two, a state apparatus based on the traditional system of regional governors and an indirectly elected cooperative arrangement put in place to help municipalities take care of tasks that surpassed the competence or demographic thresholds pertaining to each of them. The U-shaped political steering system was then born. Hence, there is still a line of regional power executed through state-led steering channels paralleling the directly and indirectly elected assemblies in governor-like arrangements. These were eventually replicated when the Nordic welfare states became established from the early 20th century onwards to form what Hörnström (2013) labels *distributive regionalism*, meaning that the municipalities operate as the street-level distributors of (regionally) mediated and controlled national policies.

The subsequent democratization follows the same formula. To take the Norwegian case as an illustration, the first turning point for national enfranchisement came in 1814. In 1837, the embryotic municipality structure received its first important legal sanctioning by Parliament (Tranvik & Selle, 2006), while the first direct election to the county councils was held as late as 1975. These processes took different courses in other Nordic countries, but the general tendency holds for the Nordic realm at large; the regional level is the last to be institutionally shaped. While the municipalities seem to have found their form (although in competence and role more than in numbers), during the last

decades the regional level has been subject to heavy political debates, a continuation of experiments, and repeated reforms. It still has not found its form.

The historical formation of the Nordic states is in line with mainstream nation-building in that the process presupposed, as well as entailed, a tendential strengthening of the functional versus the geographical dimension of institutional development; to Rokkan, this is one of the key dynamics in understanding past and present tensions in European politics as well as state formation (Flora, 1999; Stubhaug, 2019). The two main state formations until the post-Napoleon era, Denmark and Sweden, were both multi-ethnic and composite. The following period brought about a new agenda, that of the nation-state (Adler-Nissen, 2014; Østergaard, 2012). Historically, the core Scandinavian population of the Fenno-scandic peninsula could easily be swayed to define themselves as Danes, Norwegian or Swedes, as exemplified by the shifting borders between these three countries. This process was, it should be admitted, somewhat more militant when Sweden took over Scania and its adjacent regions from Denmark in the mid-17th century. Military rule was implemented to handle Danish resistance for the rest of the century. This ethnic plasticity is still marked by the existence of an inter-Scandinavian linguistic community, put to its extreme in the curious case of the small archipelago of Åland inventing itself as a Swedish-speaking nation in home rule with Finland (Joenniemi, 2014). Regional autonomy may lead even further in this case, much the same as the remaining Danish (but ethnically more distant) territories of The Faroe Islands and Greenland seek to follow the Icelandic secession in 1944 to become independent (Adler-Nissen, 2014). While these processes match the top of the Rokkanian ladder model of institutional development, they all run peacefully and are handled within institutional frameworks of dialogue. There are few signs of the kind of violent separatism found in other European contexts of regions with nation-state aspirations (Anderson, 2018). Thus, even when reaching the top of the institutional ladder running from identity-building to separatism, the Nordic processes seem to be contained within a system of deliberation rather than of aggression.

Back to the mainland, there are important historical and present cases contesting the uniformity of the nation-states. These include the Sami national awakening in the northern parts of the Fenno-Scandic peninsula (Henriksen, 2008), the status of the Finnish-speaking minorities in northern Norway and Sweden (Elenius, 2002), the settling of the debate on whether Norway consisted of one or two nations according to language (Hoel, 2011), and the problem of how to understand the Swedish component in Finnish nation-building (McRae, 1997). All these questions have a distinctly geographic aspect, since minorities, either locally or regionally, become majorities according to change in geographic scale and sub-national administrative boundaries. In recent debates on munic-

ipal and regional reforms, these issues have come to the forefront, especially in Finland and Norway, greatly hinged on whether a locally dominant language will survive as official or not with actual or projected municipal or county mergers (Strandberg & Lindell, 2020). However, these matters do not in general question the legitimacy of the political system at large. The only political group of some importance raising it to this level is the Finnish (True) Finns Party which (by establishing a discourse of true and non-true Finns implicitly, and sometimes explicitly,) questions the historical multi-ethnic basis of the state (Wahlbeck, 2016). Concerning the substantial immigration that has taken place in the Nordic countries from the 1950s onwards, the debate about the geographical distribution of this influx has only recently entered the agenda of regional political cleavages (Hooghe & Marks, 2017), which is notable since the actual geographical distribution of immigration shows strong intranational geographic variations (Karlsdóttir et al., 2018).

CONTEMPORARY ARGUMENTS FOR HAVING REGIONS

The rationales behind having a regional level are generally presented as follows.

1) *Services*: these are needed for the procurement of higher-order infrastructure and welfare services (Magnussen et al., 2007). 2) *Development*: regional development usually relies on regional actors, agencies and institutions to satisfy the national demand for fully exploiting regionally located comparative, competitive and collaborative advantages and potentials (Asheim et al., 2019; Johnsen & Ennals, 2012). In the Nordic case, this implies the need to cater for its demographic sparsity, and this has been accorded a specific objective (Objective 6) for regional policy funding within the European Union (EU) (Gløersen, 2013; Méndez et al. 2006). 3) *Culture*: many states play on regional sources for their identity and feel the need to have or take pride in having regional institutions to maintain and develop their cultural heritage (Mortensen & Suksi, 2019). 4) *Devolution*: The Nordic countries understand themselves as spearheading democratic reforms. Taking this to the regional level, downplaying regional governors and favouring directly elected decision-makers, falls in line with this meta-ideology (Kettunen & Kungla, 2005; Olsson & Åström, 2003). Nevertheless, regional governance networks continue to be debated as an alternative (Jacobsen, 2014).

Adding to the classical aspects of identity and politics, in recent decades the regional level has been highlighted as crucial to spark economic renewal in a Europe seeking to become a leading hub in the global economy. The whole paradigm of the virtues of regional economic clustering exploded just a few years after Rokkan's demise (Piore & Sabel, 1986; Porter, 1990), creating the

seedbed for later industrial policies aimed at developing regional industrial structures in the Nordic countries as they are elsewhere (Castells & Himanen, 2005; Foray, 2015). The Porterian message of a global economy made up of specialized, innovative, and high-yielding regions has, in the European scene, been transformed into the claim for all EU-regions to adopt Smart Specialization (RIS3) procedures to become eligible for EU-funding (Foray, 2015). Faced with these new challenges, the Nordic countries have reacted differently, mostly taking positions as strong regional innovators in international comparisons (Asheim et al., 2019).

THE WEAK REGIONS

Among politicians and scholars occupied with regional matters, the responses to the idea of strengthening the regional political level have often been favourable. This can, to a large degree, be understood as a reflection of the international fascination for a “Europe of regions” as it came to be formulated towards the end of the 20th century (Harvie, 1994; Micheletti, 2000). Hence, a certain euphoria creating a push for reforms affecting the second tier should be noted in the (four) largest Nordic countries, despite warnings by others about such thinking stemming from a misunderstanding of the concept and of its systemic potentials (Keating, 2008). However, creating or reinforcing a democratically elected second tier has not been the only response to the quest for strengthening regional institutions. We may identify at least three alternatives: *multilevel administrative systems*, *neoliberal management*, and *distributive regionalism*.

Multilevel administrative systems (MLA) or governance (MLG) represent labels for political orders that tend to handle regional tasks as communicative practices across geographic levels and functional sectors (Trondal & Bauer, 2015). Such arrangements have proliferated at the end of the 20th century as a response to several restructuring tendencies, following economic and concomitant welfare state crises, and as responses to various EU initiatives and policy schemes. This movement marks a change in geographic power relations making these more contextually dependent than before (Baldersheim & Ståhlberg, 2002). MLAs and MLGs may well occur alongside a defined second tier (Normann et al., 2017) but will most saliently be implemented where this is not so, as is the case in Finland (Sotarauta & Beer, 2020). As such, MLA/MLG should be understood as a competing model of regional institutionalisation (Jacobsen, 2014). Recent Swedish experiments with indirectly elected county models, occasionally replacing the traditionally directly elected council, illustrate this argument (Hörnström, 2013; Lidström, 2007).

Neo-liberal political ideas and new public management (NPM) approaches have in the last four decades permeated thinking about administrative systems and what is often labelled output democracy (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011), a theme that addresses the role of regions, specifically as service providers. In Norway, the immediate consequence of this being brought to the forefront was the decision made in 2001 by the social-democratic government to transfer the whole hospital sector from the county councils to a set of publicly-owned companies reporting directly to the state. One of the effects of this was to strip the county councils of their most important task (Hagen & Kaarboe, 2006; Mattei et al., 2013). Later, a publicly owned company (Nye Veier AS) was established to supplement the national road administration for planning, constructing, and maintaining new sections of the road system (Aandahl et al., 2017). When parts of the national road administration were retransferred to the county councils, following the 2020 regional reform, the competitive aspect of the relationship between the public road administration and Nye Veier AS came to the fore. The fascination for NPM-like institutional solutions has spread throughout the Nordic countries, and today is a reservoir to conceive alternatives to classic democratic second-tier models (Hansen et al., 2012).

Distributive regionalism has a long tradition. In Sweden, as late as the end of the 20th century, the normal way of arranging regional partnerships for economic growth and innovation was for the central state to engage the regional governors (*länsstyrelsen*) to enter the scene as their dialogue partner (Hudson, 2005). This Spinoza-like way of operating partnerships – God (the state) entertaining himself – has still not disappeared; it has merely been juxtaposed with competing models (Hörnström, 2013). In Norway, distributive regionalism and straightforward dirigisme has a long tradition within regional policy and welfare provision. Slagstad (1998) cited several cases when discussing the role of national strategists: the famous economist and statesman Erik Brofoss' grip on the Regional Development Agency, the centralized provision of cultural and sport amenities throughout the country all controlled by the Oslo-based bureaucrat, Rolf Hofmo, and the minister of education, Gudmund Hernes', ambition to establish a network of regional higher education institutions (*norgesnett*) to develop their research under the auspices of the established national universities. Lately, this mode of conduct has been repeated by the minister of culture, Abid Raja (liberal party), who last year made a sudden decision to transfer his sector out of the 2020 regional reform just a few months after its implementation – and got away with it (NRK, 2020).

But central attempts to contain the regional level do not stop here. Political discussions about the legitimacy of the county governors come to the surface every now and then in the Nordic countries as elsewhere in Europe (Tanguy

& Eymeri-Douzans, 2021). Following the Norwegian 2020 regional reform, the name of the county governors was recently changed from *fylkesmann* (county governor) to *statsforvalter*, allegedly for having a gender-neutral title. The new name was, however, received with mixed feelings from the governors themselves as it has a connotation of trivialization, the term *forvalter* meaning something between a manager and a caretaker.

THE PRESENT NORDIC STATUS

Summing up the present Nordic status, the impression is that the second tier has yet not found a definite structure. When it became (semi) independent in 1814, Norway had a county level of administration inherited from its Danish past. These counties – *amt* – were, during the early 19th century, developed along two lines. One followed the governor scheme as the regional presence of the state; the second developed as an indirectly elected association of rural municipalities devoted to higher-level tasks. This system lingered on for more than a century. The system was slightly reformed during the years to cope with structural changes, such as the post-WWII juxtaposition between urban and rural municipalities, but it had to wait until 1976 to have a directly elected county council and hence a fully-fledged three-tier system. This reform has never become fully accepted. The Conservative Party and the Progress Party still want to return to a two or a two-and-a-half tier system. One systemic peculiarity should be noted. While the regional governors are formally superior to the municipalities, the county councils are not. They are in legal terms also municipalities and have as such no right to instruct the local municipal level or to overrule its decisions unless deliberately specified to do so.

The regionally elected democratic level in Norway, when launched in its modern form, soon experienced its problematic location between a strong state and independent municipalities. The widespread political scepticism towards strengthening the regions has become manifested in a reluctance to empower them. This came to the forefront when the 1976 county councils were set to operate as regional planners integrating economic and physical planning across geographical levels. The various state sectors either ignored or participated reluctantly in these planning processes, while the local municipalities often pointed out their monopoly on local, physical planning as means of disobeying. From and Stava (1985) brutally summed up the first years of regional planning as a lecture in the art of rowing without oars. Ever since, repeated attempts to empower the county councils have ended up in some rearrangements task-wise, but with little substantial relocation of power within the three-tier system as such (Blom-Hansen et al., 2012; Kolltveit & Askim, 2017). While some tasks

have been decentralized from the state to the county councils, others have been taken away or framed in such regulatory terms that the policy element has been relocated away from the regional political agenda. The most important example of tasks removed from the regional agenda is the 2001 decision to transfer the entire hospital sector from the county councils into new NPM-like publicly owned companies. The last regional reform from 2020, which reduced the number of county councils from 19 to 11 (while promising a larger portfolio of tasks entrusted to this allegedly more robust county structure) has so far only been evaluated *ex ante* (Røtnes, 2019). However, to judge from the political debate and the processes anticipating and surrounding its implementation, it seems fair to assess its main contribution so far as pertaining to the revitalisation of the centre-periphery fault lines in Norwegian politics (Stein, 2019; Stein et al., 2020), but presumably this time also within the confines of national coping capacity. To date, the government has not signalled whether it will furnish the restructured counties with a proposed and enlarged portfolio of tasks or not. It should therefore be fair to say that the future competencies, capacities, resources and, hence, the authority of the county councils, reside fully with the state. Few signs have been given that lead us to believe that the central state feels compelled to accord the county councils a more salient place in the institutional set-up.

Moving on to the other Nordic countries, the picture offered is much the same. There has been widespread experimentation with the second tier, and in no case have the regions been given a place in the institutional order that has led to the change of its hourglass shape. In Denmark, which had a balanced three-tier model, the parliament in 2004 decided to merge the existing 13 county councils into five new regions, and to strip the regions of some of the tasks formerly residing with the county councils. Furthermore, these new regions were agreed on in a compromise for accepting a broader municipal reform, which the liberal-conservative government initially wanted to launch as a step towards skipping the regional level altogether (Bundgaard & Vrangbæk, 2007). In this, there is a parallel to the Norwegian 2020 model. Both governments primarily wanted a municipal reform and agreed to have regions to ease the process of a municipal re-arrangement.

In Finland, the two-and-a-half tier model with its indirectly elected regional institutions, has been admired as well as attacked. It has been admired for its ability to serve the post-1992 economic modernization of the country by putting to use what at that time came to be regarded as an almost ideal-typical European take on regional governance (Castells & Himanen, 2002). Yet, at the same time, it was attacked for its byzantine lack of transparency and its democratic deficit (Kettunen & Kungla, 2005). Experiments have been done in the region

of Kainuu with a fully-fledged, directly elected second tier (Sivonen, 2005). Although the evaluations have been mixed (Haveri et al., 2015), plans have been made for this model to be extended to general national practice (CorR, 2019). At the time of writing, these plans seem to have been abandoned since the country lingers on with its traditional model (Sotarauta & Beer, 2020).

In Sweden, there has, as already demonstrated, been a turn away from a traditional dual system of parallel county governors and county councils to a system of three competing models of organising the second tier (Hörnström, 2013). In addition, the directly elected county council comes in two versions, a traditional one, and the two enlarged regions of Scania and Västra Götaland, by some thought to anticipate a future of stronger regions (Blomqvist & Bergman, 2010). The plethora of models at hand could rather be taken as a sign of the opposite, the unitary, strong state with its allied municipalities conducting business as usual above and below what in Sweden is usually referred to as the “regional mess” (McCallion, 2008).

DISCUSSION

In the post-WW2 political history, the institutionalization of the regional level has been differently dealt with from one Nordic country to another, either following the broad parameters of historical variations in economic, political, and social structure or, more narrowly, political and academic cultures, since these offered institutional support and preconditions for adapting the geographical steering systems to the needs of modern welfare states (Knudsen, 2020). The way these processes have fared has increasingly also been influenced by wider European discussions on, and experiences with, regionalism in the tradition of nation-building (Anderson, 2018; Magone, 2003). The vertical integration of regions to higher geographical scales has often been viewed as complicated. Recently, the term *awkward* has been used to characterise such problems of regional integration into higher-order political entities, but then mostly to deal with the problem of integrating (nation) states into the EU (McCallion & Brianson, 2018). However, the term can also be used to characterize the problematic take that the Nordic states have on defining and establishing a solid political regional level within their confines. When the strong state undertakes regionalisation, the process becomes awkward. The historical lesson is one of taming and controlling regional voices, but regions also do have their merits, seen from above. Regional devolution may, for instance, be a means for the state to do away with “wicked problems” (Micheletti, 2000, p. 271).

When processes become awkward, strategic and tactical aspects of a play often become visible. Today, a general scheme of logic is that actors at different

levels seek to bypass each other – the state seeking support among the municipalities, the regions seeking international fora to make their cases legitimate. At present, these dynamics are specifically visible in the way regions and home-rule territories all over Europe have embraced and participated in the various EU discourses and policy schemes pertaining to their interests (Keating, 2008). A positive effect of this has been a general lowering of regional conflicts; another has been to make the relevant states more attentive to regional issues and to the settling of disputes emanating from them (Anderson, 2018). Still, the state seeks to limit or contain the development of regional powers. The outcome of these processes may often be unforeseen. When summing up the (attempted) Norwegian 2010 regional reform and comparing it with the 2004 Danish regional reform, Blom-Hansen et al. (2012) characterise the Danish reform as a success and the Norwegian one a failure, and this for reasons that come close to being unintentional.

However, one overarching rationale should be understood as guiding the states in question, that of containing regional voice. The ability to contain should be understood as the systemic capacity to deal with conflicts. For Rokkan, this analysis derives from Hirschman's classical concepts of *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty* (Hirschman, 1970; Stubhaug, 2019, p. 338ff). Systems can be judged legitimate insofar as they are able to handle dissenting voices in such ways as not to cause exits, at least not those accompanied by violence. More specifically, in our case the question about systemic handling should be specified to deal with why phenomena that appear as regional do not need to be represented by a strong regional political tier. Theoretically, the answer to this could either be that regional cleavages are not as important to political articulation these days as they were during earlier phases of nation-building, or, alternatively, that they still are, but are voiced through other channels and duly met by other institutional solutions.

CONCLUSION

Summed up, geography has played and still plays, an important part in the nation-building processes of the Nordic countries. Institutionally, this has been handled without the creation of a strong regional tier as a formalised tier of numerical representation with far-reaching competencies in the national steering chain. Historically, the geographical aspects in the nation-building process seem to have been absorbed by the interplay between the state and the local municipalities. In recent decades, various types of regional governance structures have become important. Whenever issues activating geographic cleavages come to the forefront, dealing with them does not seem to imply

political regionalism in the sense of a solid or strong second tier. This paradox comes close to seeing a common model with national variations, and labelling this model *contained regionalism* is suggested. By this, it is understood that strong regional variations or cleavages pertaining to culture, economics, and politics within each of the countries in question have become co-opted into steering systems where the state has been sufficiently attentive to regional interests to respond to these through national policy schemes within relevant sectors, and then to count on strong municipalities to take care of the more fine-grained elements in these processes.

In short, the main reasons why recent attempts at institutionalizing the regional interests within the context of a second administrative tier have not succeeded in the Nordic countries can be summarized into two key aspects: (1) The countries in question have managed to come to terms with these interests through the existing state – municipality axis, as initially suggested by Rokkan and his collaborators. (2) The institutional potential in the concept of a “Europe of regions” has been exaggerated and/or misinterpreted (Keating, 2008). Even in the cases where regions seek to become nation states (the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Åland) or claim to have untapped political powers on ethnic grounds, the states in question seem able to handle these processes peacefully and contained within existing democratic procedures acknowledged as legitimate or appropriate (Olsen & March, 2004). The dealing with regionalism in the Nordic scene may appear deviant or awkward viewed from a broader European perspective, but the systemic ability for containment should hardly be in doubt. As such, the Nordic case(s) may also offer enriching perspectives to the academic debate on regionalism in Europe and elsewhere.

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