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**The Norwegian regional government
reform**

**A two-case study comparison of regional merger
processes**

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I. Introduction

I.I. Topic

“Territorial reform is the most radical and contested reorganisation of local government” (Ebinger et al 2019, p. 1). Public sector reforms in general are complex, long and disputed processes of adapting to political, economic, social and technical changes (Bauer, Büchner and Franzke 2013, p. 11). There is no such as an optimum model of public administration and, more specifically, “there is no universally accepted answer to the question of what may constitute an appropriate organization of subnational government” (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 5). Local governments reforms have for several decades been popular for both local and regional units in Western industrial countries (Blesse and Rösel 2017).

The Norwegian regional government reform constitutes the largest territorial reform of the middle level of government in Norway in over 100 years. 19 regions were by 01 January 2020 merged into 11 new regions, with only four of the previous regions remaining as before. Merger decisions were based on expectation of larger regions being better equipped for new tasks and challenges of the future.

This Master thesis in Public Administration investigates the strategies applied by regional actors or, more precisely, regional politicians, during the reform, aimed at enabling or preventing the merger. Strategies matter in reform contexts given that reforms constitute a form of intended changes. Within this work, analysing strategies in a reform context is seen as an analysis of human agency within a framework, i.e., strategies need to be adapted to cleavage structures and institutional factors (Blom-Hansen et al. 2012). This framework poses constraints to strategic action, but at the same time it gives room for entrepreneurship.

For this end, documents produced during the merger processes have been consulted and qualitative interviews with key informants have been conducted. As a comparative case study design, this project looks at the merger cases of the Agder-region in Southern Norway as well as at the merger of Troms and Finnmark in Northern Norway. Resistance against merging has been particularly high in Finnmark, which eventually had to be forced to merge with Troms by the national political level, whereas Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder agreed on a voluntary merger at the regional level – in spite of considerable resistance in Aust-Agder at the beginning of the merger discussions.

I.II. Research problem & research question

“Doing research is constructing research, and research design is the toolbox that allows us to do that professionally” (Hancke 2007, p. 232). Gschwend and Schimmelfenning sum up the

core issues of research design as being the following: The definition of research problem and question, the specification of theory and concepts, their operationalisation and measurement, the selection of cases and observations, the control for other potential explanations and, lastly, “drawing theoretical conclusions from the empirical analysis” (Gschwend and Schimmelfennig 2007, p. 216).

This project aims at establishing which strategies were applied by key actors during the regional merger processes within Norway’s 2015 to 2020 regional government reform. The issue is characterised by comparative social relevance given that, e.g., merging regional units increases the distance from public offices to their citizens. The merger of Troms and Finnmark in particular was accompanied by pronounced societal disagreement and citizens’ protest in Finnmark. Social relevance is about the extent to which citizens should care about the results of research – implying them to be directly affected by a phenomenon and “this impact makes a difference with regard to an evaluative standard” (Lehnert et al. 2007, p. 26).

From a theoretical point of view, this study aims at applying strategies conceived primarily for analysing the action of national political actors to the regional framework [see II., theory]. Mergers of administrative units are a frequently studied issue. Although the Norwegian local and regional reform has attracted considerable academic interest [see for example Myksvoll et al. 2021 and Vabo et al. 2021], it has rarely been studied from a *regional* angle, but rather with regard to national politics. Adopting a strategy perspective to reforms means analysing human agency within a structural framework. Applying established theories to new empirical domains is one form of creating theoretical relevance (Lehnert et al. 2007).

The aim of this study is to find *which* strategies have been applied by regional politicians during the merger process, *how* the merger proceeded according to the key actors and *if* and *to which degree* the dynamics of the merger process – Agder engaging in a voluntary merger, Troms and Finnmark being forced to merge by the *Storting*ⁱ – can be explained with regard to the strategies employed.

The time frame for this study spans from initial discussions on possible mergers, the so called *nabosamtaler* initiated in 2015 based on the request by the then minister for Local Government and Modernisation, to the coming into effect of the actual merger. Yet, its focus lies on the process until the decision to merge was – or, in the case of Troms and Finnmark, was not – taken at the regional level. For Agder, this has been the case already in December 2016, with

ⁱ A glossary of Norwegian terms can be found in the annex [IX.I].

both regional parliaments – the *fylkesting* – agreeing on the merger. For Troms and Finnmark on the other hand, a turning point – after which a circumvention of the merger became improbable – can be established with the nomination of members to the *fellesnemnda* by Finnmark in December 2018. There had yet never been actual regional agreement in Finnmark on the issue.

The research problem is addressed by two central research questions.

Which strategies have been applied by regional politicians in the process towards the regional merger(s)? To what degree can the strategies applied explain the variation in reform outcomes – Agder engaging in a voluntary merger, Troms and Finnmark eventually being forced to merge by the Storting?

Strategies applied by reform proponents were concerned with getting the merger accepted by the *fylkesting* and facilitating its conduction, with opponents' strategies aimed at preventing the merger.

The pursued in-depth understanding of the merger processes points at a qualitative research design [see methods, III.].

I.III. Structure

The research problem and the related research question have been presented above. In the following, a review of the literature on local government reforms is given, from which the theoretical framework is derived. Then, the research methodology as well as the specific method(s) of data collection will be introduced – which also includes a discussion of the study's reliability and validity. A chapter on the reform context in Norway in general and on the two cases in specific is followed by the analysis of the interview data, supplemented by information from the documents consulted beforehand. The analysis part is followed by the conclusions and a short discussion. The category scheme for the analysis of information obtained in the interviews, the interview guide as well as a glossary for the Norwegian terms used within this work are given in the appendix.

II. Theory and literature review

II.I.Literature review

Literature reviews serve to map the academic state of the art in a defined field of interest. A literature review is made use to develop the theoretical framework; additionally, it can give orientation to refine the methodological approach. New findings can call for adapting the

preliminary research design. This way of proceeding is in agreement with the assumption that research design constitutes an iterative process (Haverland and Yanow 2012).

This thesis will focus on strategies applied by the – political – actors in the reform process and potential alliances established between them, yet leaving some space for different factors relevant during the mergers. Not all of the reform process is expected to be explained by actors' strategies which is why other theories might in the analysis part be referred to, too, supplementing the main analytical framework. In this chapter, first, a more general introduction to the academic discussion(s) on local government will be given in form of a literature review; then, the more concrete analytical framework on strategies present during reform processes will be presented.

The main criteria for selecting literature to be included in the review were “*local government reforms*”, the Norwegian terms “*regionreformen*” and “*fylkessammenslåing*” and the German “*Gebietsreform*”. These research criteria were applied in the Norwegian higher education library search engine Oria, the German based KonSearch as well as in Google Scholar. In addition, on the basis of some articles closely related to the research problem, a snow-ball approach was made use of to further enlarge the literature base. In a second step of the literature research, articles with a focus on “*strategies*” were added.

Reform background; local units' size – economies of scale vs. distance of public services to its users and identity

A major division line between different views of local government (reforms) goes between consolidationists and public choice theorists. The discussion, focusing on the trade-off between economies of scale and closeness of public services to the citizens, is based on potential expectations of reform outcomes, thus *not* focusing on the process component of territorial reforms. Yet, arguments central to the discourse might have – strategically – been applied by reform actors, so a short introduction to the issue(s) is presented at this point.

In their study on city-county consolidationsⁱⁱ, Leland and Thumaier (2016) discuss options for a model for the cooperation of local governments in agreement with central values of public administration. They propose that employees of local governments and politicians are in need

ⁱⁱ The authors define city-consolidations as a form of political consolidation in which two or more political entities are merged into one unit under the same elected representation and executive. They can thus be considered as the same type of consolidation as *fylkessammenslåing*, in spite of foregoing at a different level of the public sector. Functional consolidations instead refer to mergers of distinct areas or services, whereas the political entities remain the same as previous [this has not been the case for *regionreformen*].

of a theoretical frame for regional cooperation that addresses the perceived loss of power in the case of consolidations (Leland and Thumaier 2016, p. 29S). Consolidations can be differentiated by different levels and both functional as well as structural forms of consolidations encounter challenges. Crucial to (political) consolidations are debates on regional solutions and central values of public administrations, such as efficiency, effectivity, equity and accountability. A major argument in favour of consolidations is that they increase the efficiency of local units. Proponents of consolidation reforms argue that reforms minimise fragmentation and open up for scale effects. Stemming from the economic literature, economies of scale have prominently been applied to the study of subnational government units [see e.g. Houlberg 1995 for Denmark].

Public choice proponents, on the contrary, do not expect more efficiency in the use of scarce resources by consolidations and suggest that single-unit governments would rather tend to act as monopolists, thus reducing the quality of services and increasing prices, i.e. taxes. Blesse and Rösel (2017) point out that with increasing distances of citizens to their local unit of politics, voluntary engagement and political participation decrease. Smaller units instead would be more flexible in reacting to demographic challenges.

Studying the Swedish case of local and regional government reforms, Niklasson (2016) confirms that efficiency was seen as the main reason for engaging in reforms, whereas concerns about democracy were a major argument against them.

Mecking (2012), studying local government reforms in Germany in the 1960s to 1970s, shows that the line of argumentation differs for reform supporters and their opponents. Reform opponents would set value on the past, present the (expected) consequences for the smaller units (the cities, in the context of the German reforms) and highlight qualitative values. Reform proponents instead would give an outlook to the future, present consequences for the larger units (here, the region) and put an emphasis on quantitative values.

Norway has, in the post-war period, followed a consolidationist logic, reducing the number of municipalities from 774 in 1951 to 439 in 1991 (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 81 f.); the local and regional government reform of 2020 was based on the expectation of efficiency gains by larger units.

Identity is a further argument to the reasoning on local government reforms which plays a role in the discussion on the size of local or regional units. In her analysis of local government reforms in Western Germany, Mecking states that local government reforms influence the

identity of the units concerned and their citizenry (Mecking 2012, p. 457). Jacobsen (2020) notes that local identity has been extremely important during Norway's local and regional government reform, some reform opponents considering the mergers as an attack on the municipality and local identity (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen 2020, p. 55).

In terms of the outcome dimension, conducting a literature review on evaluation studies of local government reforms, Blesse and Rösel (2017) find that those studies rarely can confirm efficiency gains by local government reforms; instead of that, lower turnout, increasing inequality between districts and increasing discontent of citizens with the democratic system can be proven. This is also true for the rise of right-wing populist movements. As alternatives to municipal mergers, Blesse and Rösel list intermunicipal cooperation, functional reforms and means of modernising public administration.

Reform processes, factors

Dollery and Drew (2018) compare the processes of local government reforms in the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales (NSW). They find that the more inclusive process in Victoria has been superior to the rather hurried and top-down approach in NSW (Dollery and Drew 2018, p. 848). The NSW-government lacked a pilot programme, did not sufficiently consult independent experts; evaluation criteria were not communicated clearly at the beginning of the reform. On the contrary, the government of Victoria managed to communicate well the aims of their Performance Monitoring Regime, including input from municipal staff, political representatives, expert agencies and further stakeholders; they also set value on continuously improving over a longer period of time. Dollery and Drew also point out that contended reforms of the public sectors, such as local government reforms, imply political risks for their governments. Governments would thus often make use of independent commissions to minimise political costs of controversial decisions, an issue that is also discussed by Wallis et al (2017). Dollery and Drew's analysis is based on Bird et al.'s (2005) conditions for a competent Performance Monitoring regime in the public sector.

Uddin (2017), too, studies the local government reform in NSW that was accompanied by the 2014 presented programme "Fit for the future" (FTFT). The formal and limited public participation in FTFT is seen to have led to opposition and public engagement at the local level, such as by manifestations and public gatherings, the pronounced interest in a voting and the recurrence to the legal system.

Studying the longer-term success of local government reforms, Robotti and Dollery (2009) find that the changes of success are higher for voluntary than they are for compulsory council

mergers; thus, “if associations among local councils (either limited or extensive) are to be effective and to endure they ought not to be compulsory, but chosen by the local councils themselves” (Robboti and Dollery 2009, p. 65)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Toubeau and Massetti (2012) characterise a feedback effect of reforms – reform steps influence the framework for subsequent reform steps and this effect is the strongest for steps taken early in the process for parties that were not part of [concepting] the reform. This means that parties discontent with the reform would often bring it back to the political agenda, asking for further changes.

Behnke et al. (2011) study cases of constitutional reforms with regard to territorial institutions and arrangements in multi-level government in both federal and decentralised states. The authors distinguish between two types of problems present in the context of territorial reforms. Efficiency problems are centred around the modernising of administration and decision-making processes. In the case of group problems, “distinct groups within a society may define themselves in a number of ways, most commonly ethnically, linguistically or politically, and demand recognition or better representation in decision-making processes as a collective group” (Behnke et al. 2011 p. 455). If territorially concentrated, these groups might demand reforms of the territorial structure. Both efficiency and group problems are, during the reform process, transformed into redistributive conflicts and the two types of problems often overlap.

Findings for the most successful reform cases propose that “opportunities for participation, open dialogue and consensus building play an important role” (Behnke et al. 2011, p. 447). With a regard to arrangements relevant in the reform cases of Scotland and Switzerland, the authors suggest that all provisions allowing to establish broad consensus are means to (formal) reform success. These provisions would include a constellation of multiple cleavages [see II.II on cleavages] allowing for actors to build flexible coalitions, supporting a continuous dialogue, the reform process to be organised in a manner that promotes an argumentative style of negotiation, making bargaining less attractive as well as “a political culture of sequential conflict accommodation, avoiding a situation in which one group is the all-time winner and others are all-time losers” (Behnke et al. 2011, p. 465). In order to solve redistributive conflicts and succeed in the reform, “[p]ersistent and broad discourse, a genuine problem-solving attitude [and the] acceptance of flexible solutions” are required (Behnke et al. 2011, p. 465). It is also suggested that fragmented societies or consensus democracies might be better equipped with those capacities than are homogenous societies.

ⁱⁱⁱ This argument is obviously based on a post-merger evaluation; on the other hand, the voluntariness of a merger is part of its process components and has therefore been included at this point.

Role of the bureaucracy

Whereas this thesis focuses on political actors, the role of the administration in the preparation and conduction of reforms should not be neglected. Jacobsen (2005) compares bureaucrats' and politicians' attitudes towards public sector reform in general. It is commonly assumed that bureaucrats might oppose the introduction of reforms in the public sector and that, based on different standings, reforms will lead to conflict between the two spheres. Yet, Jacobsen's results do *not* support the broader notion of a conflict between politicians and administrators; instead, politicians and administrators tend to have similar views, but there is a large difference between political parties, the administration's position being located somewhere between political extremes. The administration appears to act as a moderating instance "slowing down reform initiatives from the most active political parties, and speeding up the tempo of reform compared to the most sceptical parties" (Jacobsen 2005, p. 789).

Myksvoll et al. agree that "bureaucracies both shape and constrain reforms" (Myksvoll et al. 2021, p.2). In their study on *regionreformen*, the authors identify two logics bureaucrats might be distinguished by – a "logic of discipline" advocating larger units and streamlining of bureaucracies as well as an "identity logic" that recognizes feelings of attachment as important in shaping preferences (Myksvoll et al. 2021).

Concluding – the field of local government reforms

Studying territorial reforms in 17 Western European countries, Askim et al. propose four variables to explain territorial upscaling, understood as "considerable reduction in the number of local governments" (Askim et al. 2017, p. 556), – decentralisation as by growth in local government expenditure or employment, urbanisation, recent territorial upscaling clearing the way for further upscaling and fiscal stress. The inclusion of recent reforms is based on the proposal that "once historical continuity has been broken, the system becomes less resistant to change" (Askim et al. 2017, p. 556). This approach is based on the assumption that structural changes are consequences both of political preferences and of institutional design. The authors regard actor-based explanations as necessary to explaining concrete reforms, yet, actor-based explanations "can hardly explain why the reorganisation started in the first place" (Askim et al. 2017, p. 557). Askim et al.'s framework thus follows an institutional perspective, regarding the above-mentioned variables as drivers for territorial upscaling.

With a regard to the field of research on local government reforms outlined above, this thesis takes a more micro-oriented approach to reforms, looking at strategies applied by regional

actors. In contrast to, e.g., Askim et al. (2017), it focuses on (political) actor-based explanations, yet considering strategies to be constrained by institutional and cultural factors. The notion of strategies, as discussed in the following, has been applied to the study of reforms by several authors (see e.g. Blom-Hansen et al. 2012, Klausen et al. 2019) studying reform dynamics from a national political angle.

II.II. Theoretical framework

Whereas structuralist accounts are centred around the constraints actors are encountered with, implying that structures are the main determinants of political outcomes, other theorists point out that the role of human agency in forming political outcomes should not be underestimated. The relationship between structure and agency would not be of unidirectional nature, but structure shaping human action and vice versa (Imbroscio 1999, p. 46). Examining strategies employed by the political actors, this thesis focuses on human agency, rather than on structure. Yet, it is cleavage *structures* that constrain and at the same time open up the room for agency and the application of strategies – *if* political entrepreneurs succeed in “reading” and making use of the cleavages. There thus is an interaction and a form of balance between structure and agency. As Blom-Hansen et al. (2012) put it, agency approaches are not identical to voluntarism. Actors *are not* free to apply any strategy of their preference – or at least they are not guaranteed to obtain success by doing so –, but *they can* try to profit from the opportunities for action left by structural constraints or to enlarge the room for action by manipulating these constraints. Structures themselves can be object to strategic action, with some actors constructing more options for action than first given by the structural constraints (Blom-Hansen et al. 2012, p. 73). Structures are in this work taken into account by looking at cleavages between the different (groups of) actors.

This thesis focuses on the strategies applied by the regional politicians in order to succeed in either enabling or hindering the merger of their *fylke*. Strategies can be defined as “the procedures of decision-making adopted by policymakers in order to accommodate interests and stakeholders affected by policy initiatives” (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 12). Choosing effective reform strategies is crucial to handling (opposition in) reform processes (Blom-Hansen et al. 2012).

In terms of multi-level governance, Blom-Hansen, Christiansen, Fimreite and Selle (2012) suggest three strategies that the national government might apply to secure a majority for succeeding in its reform aims. First, they can engage in a confusion strategy, acting

strategically, or even manipulative, in delivering information on the prospected effects of the reform. Second, they might make use of alliance building, i.e., using cleavages within the opposition to gain new support. Lastly, they might apply a compensation strategy, compensating perceived losses of their opponents by scaling back the size of the reform or linking different issues.

A similar, though not identical, framework is proposed by Klausen et al. (2019). The authors, studying Norway's *kommunereform*, focus on three strategies of decision-making under heterogenous conditions. Those are the creation or emergence of winning coalitions between groups of actors, such as political parties, solutions that contain parts of policy A and parts of policy B, labelled as compromises as well as non-resolving conflicts, but keeping the reform alive by addressing short-term problems in a pragmatic manner, labelled as "quasi-solutions" by the authors (Klausen et al. 2019, p. 113).

The authors also point out the role of cleavages for potentially building winning coalitions. "A cleavage marks differences in opinion along a certain dimension among a set of actors" (Klausen et al. 2019, p. 114); cleavages can be based on, e.g., class, ethnicity, political ideology, culture, geographical location, professional background or institutional affiliation. Often, cleavages are cross-cutting as "actors disagree on some issues and agree on others, thereby reducing polarization and conflicts between the actors" (Klausen et al. 2019, p. 114). With regard to the role of cleavages in the reform (preparation) process, the authors conclude that whereas overlapping cleavages allow for building winning coalitions, "cross-cutting cleavages indicate a need for compromising or for using quasi-solutions" (Klausen et al. 2019, p. 122). Yet, Klausen et al. also note that not only the pattern, but also the depth of cleavages might be of relevance. Cleavages being deep or more superficial or located in-between on that continuum impacts the room left for compromises. Based on imperfect information on other actors, identifying or estimating the depth of cleavages comes as a challenge and incorrect assumptions might cause "a faulty choice of strategy" (Klausen et al. 2019, p. 123).

The importance of cleavages has also been noted by Behnke et al. (2011) stating that all provisions that facilitate the establishment of broad consensus are means to (formal) reform success and these provisions would include a constellation of multiple cleavages allowing for actors to build flexible coalitions.

Baldersheim and Rose (2010) compare different explanations to the politics of territorial choice, mainly focusing on national policy-making, also proposing a combined framework. Reform

initiatives' success can be seen as dependent on the action and skills of policy entrepreneurs in framing policies and devising strategies to lift policy ideas out of a larger group of possibilities – as proposed by John Kingdon –, the capability of policy entrepreneurs to create advocacy coalitions and the capability of their opponents to form veto alliances as well as the institutional context in which policy entrepreneurs operate, defining the legitimate opportunities for stakeholder participation (Baldersheim and Rose 2020, p. 11). Entrepreneurs accordingly play a crucial role in that they are willing to devote resources in order to reach future gains (Kingdon 1984, p. 188). Some stakeholders may represent potential veto groups and who the veto groups are is dependent on a country's institutional structure. In a reform context, framing incorporates two main components of policy arguments – reasons for which a particular change is required and evidence to support these claims (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 11).

Baldersheim and Rose, too, refer to the cleavages approach initially conceived by Lipset and Rokkan. They propose that the cleavages most likely to be activated by territorial reforms are centre-periphery and left-right, the former being highly relevant in Norway from a comparative point of view. Generally, there should further be country-specific cleavages dependent on the nature of reforms and historical traditions in the respective country. It is the local context that defines the stakes of the reform process as local governments with a comparatively large budget and a high number of functions imply higher interest of the national government to exercise control over the local level. Reform outcomes are thus more important than in instances of weaker local government. This can be measured in the proportion of local spending to overall government spending, a higher proportion of local spending indicating distributional conflicts and a more pronounced left-right cleavage. In spite of that – i.e., Norway having local governments with comparatively large budgets which would indicate a dominance of the left-right cleavage –, based on studies on Norwegian reform attempts in the 1990s and 2000s, the authors state that the centre-periphery cleavage has been dominant in Norwegian reform dynamics.

The authors' proposed reform typology is based on two dimensions – the scope of reforms and the room for local voice. Within this framework, comprehensive reforms with little room for local voice constitute the “Jacobin corner”, as opposed to a more incremental and bottom-up approach in the “Girondin corner”. Comprehensive reforms with large room for local voice are labelled as experiments, whereas incremental reforms leaving weak room for local voice are termed as reserve power (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 14). Strategies are expected to follow

a Jacobin pattern in a majoritarian polity and a Girondin pattern in consociational polities; borderline cases are expected to result in experimental or reverse power strategies.

In line with their considerations on the role of local government spending, in instances of strong local government, the authors propose that conflicts will follow a left-right pattern. In cases of weaker local government, conflicts should be centred around the centre-periphery cleavage as indicated by conflicts between local and national government (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 19 f.).

Studying previous reform attempts in Norway, Baldersheim and Rose note that within the 2000's regional reform attempt, developmental capacity was a key aspect of framing. Central patterns of conflict had been centre vs. periphery, urban vs. rural, corporative vs. territorial interests and right vs. centre and left. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the centre versus periphery dimension had been dominating. Furthermore, distributional efficiency was particularly relevant and more generally in the Nordic countries, legitimacy of the welfare state was another background issue. Positional interests specific to the Norwegian case were that "in particular the larger cities were in favour of abolishing the regions and taking over many of their functions, while the small municipalities were in favour of stronger regions, seeing these as a guarantee of small-scale local government" (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 251).

More generally, in their sample of 11 countries studied, the most frequently used argument for opening up a window of opportunity for reforms is efficiency, whereas democratisation and the need for preserving tradition and identity are arguments prominently applied by reform opponents. To the authors surprise, arguments presenting small municipalities as more responsive to citizens' needs were not present (Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 242 f.).

With a regard to the constellation of multiple actors and the multi-level framework Norway's regional reform was embedded in, Schattschneider's (1960) socialisation of conflicts appears of interest. Schattschneider's theory essentially states that political conflict spreads as the group about to lose the fight introduces supporters to defend its position. This leads to continuous changes in the relative strength of the antagonistic groups, where terms or "cleavages" of the conflict are being reframed (Edy and Risley Baird 2016, p. 2598 f.) Strategies can thus be *extended*, adding new elements or involving new actors.

Synthesising (the) propositions by Baldersheim and Rose, Blom-Hansen et al. and Klausen et al., this thesis' analytical framework will focus on the following strategies.

- I. *Coalition building* – as labelled alliance building by Blom-Hansen et al. and creating winning coalitions by Klausen et al. –, that is obtaining support outside one’s own political grouping / party by, e.g., making use of cleavages in the opposition. *Coalition building* is expected to be facilitated by the presence of overlapping cleavages.
- II. *Compromising* – linking different issues to create solutions that contain parts of policy A and parts of policy B. As noted by Klausen et al., *compromising* can be expected to be applied in instances of cross-cutting cleavages.
- III. *Compensation*, as suggested by Blom-Hansen et al, perceived losses of the opponents by scaling back the size of the reform or linking different issues. *Compensating* is accordingly closely related to Klausen et al.’s *compromising*.
- IV. *Non-resolving conflicts*, but keeping the reform alive by addressing short-term problems in a pragmatic manner (Klausen et al. 2019).
- V. *Confusion* – as proposed by Blom-Hansen et al. –, that is strategical ways of delivering information on the prospected reform output.
- VI. *Extension of conflicts* by involving new actors or including new elements to the discussion.

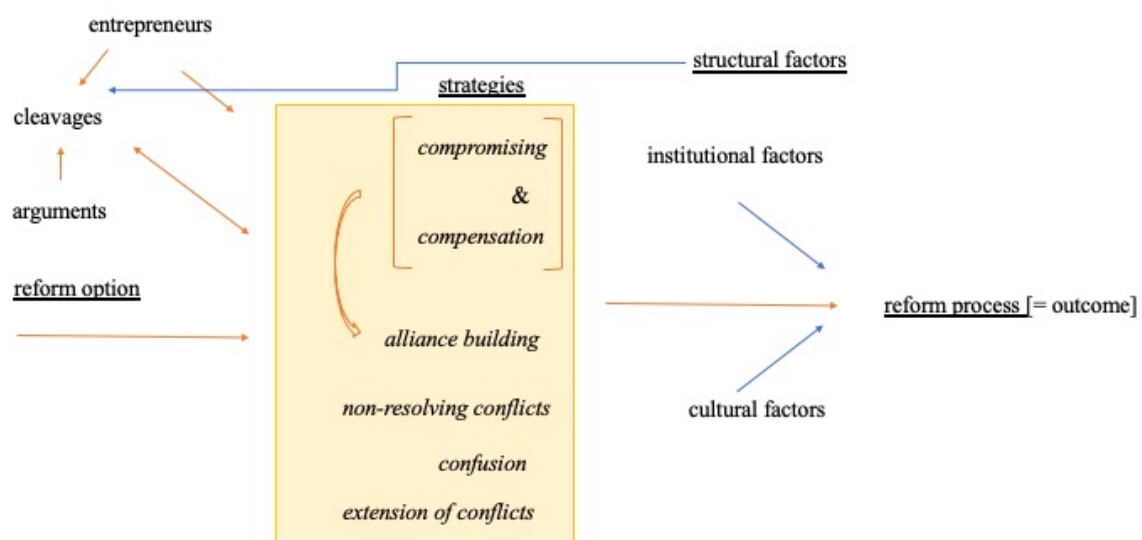


Figure 1: Analytical framework.

As demonstrated by Figure 1, the option for a reform opens a window for strategic action. Cleavages present can be activated by entrepreneurs employing strategies. Hereby, arguments applied build on cleavages. Strategies include *compromising* and *compensation*, *non-resolving conflicts*, *confusion* and *extension of conflicts* strategies; particularly *compromising* and *compensation* can also serve as a basis for a further strategy, *alliance building*. The strategies

applied impact the reform process and its outcome. The effect of strategies is yet modified by structural, that is institutional and cultural, factors. Cleavages can, admittedly, be regarded as structural factors themselves. It has here, however, been chosen to include cleavages into the left side of the model given that the relationship between arguments, cleavages, entrepreneurs and strategies is central to the proposed framework [a pile connecting structural factors to cleavages has been included in Figure 1 to account for the structural dimension of cleavages]. Both *non-resolving conflicts* and *confusion* are expected to be difficult to identify from an external perspective given that their identification requires detailed insider knowledge on the modalities and opportunities of the merger processes. This is particularly true for the case of *confusion* strategies whose identification would, e.g., require the interview objects to share information about information they disposed of, yet did not fully share, during the merger process.

Compromising and *compensation* are on the one hand treated as strategies of their own; on the other hand, they can constitute a means to an overarching strategy of *coalition building*,

As noted above, *compromising* and *compensation* are closely related terms, with *compromising* constituting some form of bargaining concerning the content of one specific issue; whereas in instances of *compensation*, a new element is added or, following Blom-Hansen et al., the reform size is being scaled back. Scaling back might arguably also constitute an instance of *compromising*. In practical application and on the outcome dimension, *compromising* and *compensation* are thus overlapping.

Framing, as defined by Baldersheim and Rose (2010), as well as communication more generally are within this framework not treated as strategies on their own, but rather as sub-strategies or means actors might make use of in of applying the strategies outlined above.

In order to build and apply strategies, the capability of policy entrepreneurs, i.e., dominant actors within the reform process, is required. This holds true for both sides – that is, whereas pro-reform entrepreneurs might engage in *coalition building*, reform opponents might form opposing (veto) coalitions.

Generally, it is important to note that the literature on reform strategies tends to look at the national level, while this thesis studies reform processes at the regional level. This difference is expected to have implications – at the sovereign national state level, there should be broader room for strategic action, whereas at the regional level room for action is limited due to dependencies on the national level.

The role of the formal institutional, or rather, the political-administrative, context in defining legitimate opportunities for stakeholder participation, as emphasised by Baldersheim and Rose, is *not* expected to be central to this study, at least not for explaining differences between the two reform cases, as the institutional context at the regional level is quite similar between Troms and Finnmark and Agder.

III. Methodology

III.I. Cases and case selection

This work aims at examining merger processes within the Norwegian regional government reform, in the course of which in total seven mergers were conducted [Table 1], within a comparative case study design.

In small-n research, case selection typically is based on an intentional logic given that the types of cases selected determine which inferences can be drawn. Yet, a non-random case selection for small-n Research Designs involves the risk of selection bias stemming “from a faulty inference that wrongly attributes the properties of the scrutinized cases to the larger universe of cases” (Leuffen 2007, p. 145). Small-n intentional case selection thus opens up for selection bias, such as by only picking cases that confirm the theory or by choosing cases that share the same outcome. Approaching case selection as a “theory-guided iterative process” (Leuffen 2007, p. 145), one should pay attention to select cases between which there is some level of variance as “causal analysis needs variance” (Leuffen 2007, p. 151). In this project, variance between the cases has been established by selecting cases that, both having had a problematic prehistory, yet showed different dynamics in their respective merger process.

Typologies can help in the selection of theoretically interesting cases; they also help in making case selection mechanisms more transparent (Leuffen 2007). The following table lists the mergers that occurred within the Norwegian 2020 regional reform. Fifteen regions merged into seven new regions, with four regions, that is Oslo, Møre og Romsdal, Nordland and Rogaland, remaining unchanged. Regions are considered as enforced mergers, so-called *tvangssammenslåing*, if one or more of the *fylkesting* involved had formally taken the decision that they did not want to merge (Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet 2021).

Table 1: Overview of regional mergers in the Norwegian regional government reform

New regional name	Number of <i>fylker</i> merged	<i>Tvangssammenslåing</i>	Comment / reasoning
Agder	2 [Aust-Agder + Vest-Agder]	No	
Innlandet	2 [Hedmark + Oppland]	Yes	
Troms og Finnmark	2 [Troms + Finnmark]	Yes	
Trøndelag	2 [Nord- + Sør-Trøndelag]	No	Merger already in 2018
Vestfold og Telemark	2 [Vestfold + Telemark]	Yes	
Vestland	2 [Hordaland + Sogn og Fjordane]	No	Rogaland initially included in the <i>intensjonsavtale</i>
Viken	3 [Østfold, Akershus + Buskerud]	Yes	

The table illustrates that all mergers constituted mergers of two regions, apart from Viken. Considering the number of *fylker* merged as an independent variable and aiming at limiting variance on independent variables, Viken has been excluded for as a case of comparison. Within the group of voluntary merged regions, in the case of Vestland, a third region, Rogaland has priorly been included to the discussions, limiting comparability. Agder has been chosen over Trøndelag given that first, Trøndelag already merged in 2018, two years before all other regions, and second, initial resistance to the merger has been perceived lower for both Trøndelag-*fylker* than it has been for Agder with regard to Aust-Agder. A certain level of initial resistance being present increases similarity in terms of independent variables for Agder as compared to the cases of *tvangssammenslåing*. Looking at the enforced mergers of two regions each, admittedly, Innlandet or Vestfold and Telemark *might* have constituted interesting cases for comparison, too. The merger of Troms and Finnmark has largely been chosen because it arguably constituted *the most* conflictive case of this group [see context, IV.IV]. Moreover, the constellation in which one former region or regional capital would constitute the future centre of gravity, a factor of similarity to Agder, was more obvious for Troms and Finnmark with

Troms[ø] than for Vestfold and Telemark. The reasoning for specifically choosing the cases of Agder and Troms and Finnmark is in the following described in detail.

Case selection for this study has primarily been based on the level of conflict the regional merger processes were accompanied by, implying a variance (at least) on the outcome or dependent variable. Troms og Finnmark was selected as it has been accompanied by a relative high level of conflict, especially when compared to the processes in other Norwegian regions. In Agder, too, initial resistance was present and the region had previously experienced an unsuccessful merger attempt in 2011 [see IV.III]. Both cases were thus characterised by some level of opposition towards merging – and this was especially true for one of the former *fylker* each, that is Aust-Agder and Finnmark, respectively –, but whereas for Troms og Finnmark it was the *Storting* that eventually had to decide on the merger, the Agder-regions engaged in a voluntary merger. In that respect, as this work focuses on mergers at the *regional* level, Troms og Finnmark might be labelled as an instance of a failed merger as the regional actors did *not* agree on merging themselves. In terms of variables, the dependent variable accordingly is the level of conflict the respective merger was accompanied by or, more precisely, the degree of voluntariness, having a voluntary merger at the regional level in Agder versus a non-voluntary or failed merger in Troms and Finnmark.

The merger of Troms and Finnmark has been accompanied by a high level of conflict and controversial debates and considerable national attention. Eventually, the national parliament had to force the single *fylker* to merge, considered thus as a forced merger, a so-called *tvangssammenslåing*. Opposition to the reform was particularly high in the rural areas of Finnmark whose population was afraid to lose power and the access to public services to the more densely populated area around Tromsø.

The merger of the Agder-*fylker* appears an interesting case for comparison. Both constitute mergers of two previous regions each, whereas in other cases, such as for the Eastern-Norwegian Viken, three regions were integrated or, as for the Western-Norwegian region of Vestland, three regions were engaged in discussions on a potential merger for a considerable amount of time. There are considerable differences between Norway's southernmost region of Agder and its most northern region, Troms and Finnmark. These differences are of geographic, demographic and structural nature – especially the large area of Finnmark is, as has also been highlighted in the interviews [V.], met with infrastructural challenges. Northern Norway, especially Troms og Finnmark, is characterised by a low population density of 3.5 inhabitants

per km², whereas Agder with about 21 inhabitants per km² scores a little above the Norwegian average (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen 2020, p. 33) – which can be expected to have implications for the closeness of available public services. It is assumed that physical characteristics of a region highly influence the topics that become political relevant in a region, shaping social and economic differences (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen, p. 36).

In spite of their differences, for both new regions one city each could be characterised as the potential political-administrative capital, having the by far highest number of inhabitants – those were Kristiansand (about 110.400 in 2019) and Tromsø (about 76.600 in 2019) (KommuneProfilen 2020). Given that, it was actors in the respective *other* former region that were afraid of losing power to the new centre [see e.g. Andersen and Gjestland 2016 for Agder, Bruland 2017 for Troms and Finnmark].

As mentioned earlier, initially, the merger of the two Trøndelag-*fylker* was thought of as an alternative case with lower conflict on the outcome variable. The main argument against that constellation was that the level of conflict in Trøndelag already appears to have been low at the stage of initial consultations, which would make it even more difficult to trace back different outcomes – Trøndelag engaging in a voluntary merger, Troms og Finnmark being forced to merge by the national parliament – back to the reform process. Besides that, the merger of Trøndelag already took place in 2018, functioning as a form of pilot project, which implies some information advantage for the regions that merged later in 2020 – official documents of the merger preparation phase in Agder do in fact sometimes refer to the Trøndelag experiences (Forhandlingsutvalget 2016).

Assuming that the mergers of Agder and Troms og Finnmark were highly similar in most aspects but the regions' geography and demography, a comparison between them can be considered a most-similar case design. Based on Jon Stuart Mill's method of difference, following a most-similar case design, the cases chosen should differ on the dependent variable and apart from that be as similar as possible (Gerring 2001, p. 210). Similarity is given in terms of the number of regions involved per merger and the presence of opposition against the merger concentrated particularly on one of the former *fylker*. Proposing a most-similar design, however, poses considerable requirements to case selection – the mergers should, theoretically, not differ significantly in any other aspects. Considering that both mergers were embedded in the course of the Norwegian regional reform of 2020, from a more general – put differently, less internal Norwegian – standpoint, the mergers of Agder and of Troms og Finnmark *can* be

framed as a most-similar case design. In short, the mergers are similar in that both constitute a merger of two regions of which one is considerably smaller, showing initial resistance and in that they occurred within the context of the same reform. In terms of the outcome, they differ, with Agder experiencing comparatively low levels of conflict and merging voluntary, Troms and Finnmark's merger process being characterised by high levels of conflict and the *Storting* eventually forcing the two *fylker* to merge.

This research project thus looks at two cases, that is the merger of Troms and Finnmark and the merger of the Agder regions.

III.II. Data collection – qualitative expert interviews

Interviews are one of the major sources of evidence for case studies. Allowing the researcher to pose the questions he is interested in, they are “perhaps the most directed and targeted method in the qualitative arsenal” (Rathbun 2018, p. 7). Interviews should have some room for adaption, yet they should not be held unplanned. This is why an interview guide has been established for the conduction of semi-structured interviews. Applying an interview guide, the interviewer should dispose of some flexibility in terms of the chronology of interview questions.

A particular subgroup of interviews are elite or expert interviews. They give the researcher the option to collect expert knowledge – knowledge that is not accessible to everyone in the area of interest. Expert knowledge is derived from professional or voluntary engagement of individuals in particular fields – individuals that thus enjoy some form of privileged access to social constellations, decision processes or people (Meuser and Nagel 2009). A distinction can be made between an interview object's knowledge about his or her own action and the institutional provisions guiding this action on the one hand and context knowledge about the contextual requirements of others' action on the other hand. Conducting expert interviews, it often is convenient to query both types of knowledge (Meuser and Nagel 2009, p. 470 f.).

This study is essentially based upon qualitative expert interviews. Key informants were chosen from the group of participants of the *fellesnemnda*, the committee that had been tasked with negotiating the terms of the merger, comprising an equal number of representatives from both former *fylker*, 19 for both Troms and Finnmark and eleven for each of the Agder-regions. Interviews were conducted with two representatives from each *fylkeskommune* in the *fellesnemnda*. Given that the participants of the *fellesnemnda* are essentially political, that is elected, representatives – being members of the *fylkesting* and having been send to the

committee by the former –, it was chosen to conduct interviews with people affiliated to the traditional different political blocks in Norwegian politics. This means that interviews, *per fylke*, were conducted with one politician one member of Arbeiderpartiet (Ap), representing the centre-left, and a politician of Høyre (H) belonging to the conservative spectrum. Arbeiderpartiet and Høyre represent the two largest parties in Norway, both in terms of electoral success and the number of members, with Arbeiderpartiet having a considerable lead in the latter. They can thus usually be considered the most influential party within their respective blocks, typically opposing – and also, alternating – each other in government and opposition. In terms of national politics, their standings on the regional reform differed – Høyre was part of the national government that started and accompanied the implementation of the reform, whereas Arbeiderpartiet’s position on the mergers was more ambivalent, the national party branch eventually going into the 2021 elections stating the intention to reverse (some of) the enforced mergers.

Initially, it was also considered to conduct interviews with one of the parties that traditionally were strong in the respective region – such as Kristelig folkeparti (KrF) in the Agder-regions – or that had shown particular electoral success in the course of the *regionreformen* process, as it has been the case for Senterpartiet (Sp) in both Troms and Finnmark. In order to keep the research design as symmetric as possible, (only) interviewing representatives from the same two parties in all four former regions was chosen as a more consistent approach.

Interviews were conducted in early November 2021 and in January 2022 in Agder and in Troms og Finnmark, respectively. Interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Generally, it is assumed that interviews held in the interviewee’s mother tongue are to be preferred (Bogner, Littig, Menz 2014, p. 44 f.); they also make it easier for the respondents to delve into their everyday political-administrative vocabulary.

Within the framework of semi-structured interviews, this thesis’ approach builds on the assumption that for qualitative research explanations tends to be multivariate, i.e., the combined impact of different variables is of interest (Mahoney and Goertz 2016). This means that there expectedly is more than one independent variable impacting the outcome variable, asking the researcher to take account of different variables involved. This implies the need for some openness in the data collection process.

Ideally, within this research project, qualitative interviews with key informants were expected to open for a deeper understanding of regional political actors’ strategies and motives crucial to

the reform process, also allowing to find out about new perspectives or reasons that might not have been considered previously.

The interviews were initiated asking the interview object to shortly present him- or herself and to give a brief description of the merger process. The interview guide then was divided into one part posing questions on the respondent’s party-political work for or against the merger process, including arguments applied and dividing lines between the different groupings. The second part focused on contact and cooperation with different actors at the regional, national and local level, also asking about dominant actors during the process. Eventually, a question was added to account for differences in cooperation after the establishment of the *fellesnemnda* and room was given to the respondents to touch upon topics they themselves regarded as central and that yet not were included into the interview guide. The interview guide can be found in the annex [IX.II].

In the interview preparation stage, documents, such as official reports, minutes from meetings in the *fellesnemnda* and newspaper articles, were consulted in order to gain a more comprehensive overview of the single cases. These sources differ from the interview data given that they already were present – in contrast to the latter which were obtained within the framework of this specific research project. Documents of relevance during the interview guide preparation will partly also be referred to within the analysis part of the study. Interviews and documents are two of the six major sources of case study evidence identified by Robert Yin (2018).

Table 2: Overview of data sources

Sources of data	How many / type	What information / data collected?
Interviews	8	Actors’ / parties’ standings and (strategic) action, the interview objects’ own perceptions
Documents	Newspaper articles, official reports and minutes ^{iv}	Topics discussed during the merger process

^{iv} The list of documents consulted can be found in the references [VIII.] under “Official documents” and “Internet and media sources”.

As mentioned in the introduction [I.], this study is designed to focus on the negotiation period prior to establishing the *fellesnemnda*. Some information on the period after its establishment obtained in the interviews has however been included, too. This was deemed necessary given the fact that informants in Troms and Finnmark pointed out that resistance was still present even during the working period of the *fellesnemnda* and after the merger entering into force in January 2020.

With a regard to current developments in Troms and Finnmark, one might suggest that conducting interviews at a time when there recently, with the new national government elected in autumn 2021, had been the decision to reverse the merger could jeopardise the findings and actors' statements. However, this argument can be disproven by the fact that resistance has been present *all the time*; so, conducting interviews two to three years earlier would presumably have led to the same results. The differences in standpoints in Troms and Finnmark as opposed to Agder are thus *not* caused by the situational setting about two years after the merger went into force.

III.III. Data analysis

Not all of the data obtained within a research project can be made use of. Therefore, the researcher has to winnow the data in order to focus on the most relevant variables (Creswell and Creswell 2018, p. 192). The analysis of expert interviews following logical units constitutes a form of qualitative content analysis. Content analyses enable the researcher to extract information from text and to re-use the information in a structured manner, hereby reducing the information basis (Gläser and Laudel 2010).

Categorising is central to the analysis of qualitative data (Jacobs 2018). For this means, the interview recordings have first been transliterated and information has been classified into the previously established category system. Categories have been deductively derived from the theoretical framework, focusing on arguments, cleavages and strategies applied by regional actors. The categorisation process was yet open for the establishment of new inductive categories based on topics that appeared of particular relevance during the interviews.

In the course of the construction of the categorisation system, thematic categories have been split up into sub-categories. A residual category has been added to solve the challenge of having an exhaustive category system, implying that each text fragment could be sorted into at least one (sub-)category (Schreier 2012, p. 76). An assignment of text fragments to multiple categories has within this work been allowed for. The allocation of groups of statements or paragraphs to the categories has been done by employing the Nvivo software. The category

scheme is described at the beginning of the empirical chapter [V.I]; it is also attached in the annex.

III.IV. Validity, reliability and generalisability

There are four tests to the quality of social science research; these are reliability and three types of validity, construct, internal and external validity.

Reliability aims at minimising error and bias, requiring that the researcher has “to make as many procedures as explicit as possible” (Yin 2018, p. 46). If possible, the researcher should demonstrate that if another researcher repeated the steps of his project, the same results would be obtained. For qualitative interviews, replication tends to be impracticable given that the situational context is relevant; qualitative interviews are therefore characterised by *limited* reliability. A means to strengthening reliability at the analysis stage is the coding of the data by more than one person, building up inter-coder reliability, or by the same person for more than one time, establishing intra-coder reliability (Given 2012). Due to norms of data privacy protection, coding by other researchers was not an option for this thesis. The process of coding, re-structuring the coded segments in the empirical findings’ chapter [V.] and in the following analysing the findings [VI.] did imply that some fragments were categorised more than one time, establishing some level of (intra-coder) reliability. However, a complete second round of coding has, given time constraints, not been conducted. In order to strengthen transparency, both the interview guide and the categorisation scheme for the data analysis can be found in the appendix.

Internal validity tries to establish causal relationships so that “certain conditions are believed to lead to other conditions, as distinguished from spurious relationships” (Yin 2018, p. 42). For this thesis, internal validity is centred around the relationship between strategies applied by regional actors and the merger process dynamics, as distinguished from dynamics that were majorly formed by other factors.

Internal validity can, e.g., be strengthened by pattern matching and by addressing rival theories. Pattern matching requires the researcher to compare the study’s findings to patterns priorly predicted. If the predicted and the empirical patterns are similar, the case study’s internal validity is supported (Yin 2018, p. 175 f.). For this study, patterns are about *how* strategies applied by regional politicians influenced the merger processes. It was expected that strategies have been applied more successfully by reform proponents in Agder than by reform proponents in Troms and Finnmark.

Construct validity requires the researcher to make use of adequate operationalisations for the concepts studied. The central concept of this study are strategies applied by regional actors in

the course of the merger process. The operationalisation of these strategies is based on allocating statements to the sub-categories in the category scheme. Strengthening construct validity can be achieved by triangulation of data and the maintenance of a chain of evidence (Yin 2018, p. 128). Here, triangulation of data is given by making use of both documents, essentially newspaper articles, and the interviews, the latter being the main source of data. This approach counters a validity challenge this study was confronted with – the interviewees were asked to report on processes that occurred several years ago, which is why there is a risk of them issuing their *ex-post* evaluation of the process instead of their impressions and opinions *in the course of* the merger process. The documents on the other hand were majorly produced *in the course of* the merger, offering a good comparative complement to the interview data. Establishing inter- or intra-coder reliability [see the reliability discussion above] is also a way of strengthening construct validity.

External validity is concerned with the generalisability of results to a larger population. Qualitative research has a comparatively narrow scope for generalisation – results should be possible to generalise to a *limited* range of cases (Mahoney and Goertz 2006). Generalisability for this study is limited by the Norwegian setting, making it more generalisable to a Scandinavian context than, e.g., to an Eastern European one. As this is a comparative case study design consisting of two cases, statistical generalisation over cases has not been the intention of this research. An alternative form of generalisation suggested by Yin might be applicable; this is analytical generalisation towards theories. Yin proposes that “you should think of your case study as the opportunity to shed empirical light on some theoretical concepts or principles” (Yin 2018, p. 38). Aiming for analytical generalisation, the cases to which one can generalise the theoretical argument on should be named. For this study, such can be other local or regional government mergers or mergers of administrative or public organisations in a more general sense; such might, e.g., include hospital or higher education institution mergers.

IV. Context

IV.I. Norway’s multi-level governmental system

Norway’s system of subnational government is divided into municipalities, the *kommuner*, and larger regions, the *fylkeskommuner*; the Norwegian multi-level system thus consists of three administrative levels. Formally, *kommuner* and *fylkeskommuner* are co-equal in the Norwegian system; the latter are thus *not* functioning as a type of super-municipality. Actually, the municipalities can be seen to play a more central role in that they distribute of the by far largest share of public resources (Jacobsen 2020, p. 17). Taken together, Norway’s *fylkeskommuner*

and *kommuner* stand for 50% of all public consumption and 40% of public investments, employing nearly 60% of the employees in the public sector (Jacobsen 2020, p. 61). Both *kommuner* and *fylkeskommuner* obtain their main income from taxation, yet the *fylkeskommuner* are more dependent on national transfers. Norway's local units are a crucial part of the welfare state, the municipalities' role in delivering services being that extensive that the country sometimes is described as based on a collection of "*velferdskommuner*", welfare municipalities (Jacobsen 2020, p. 10).

Despite the crucial role of the local level, Norway is a politically unitary state, having, as opposed to federal states such as Germany and the United States, only one law-making parliament, the *Storting*. Norway's long-standing division into *kommuner* and *fylkeskommuner* was for the first time incorporated in the Norwegian basic law in its 2016 revision, stating that citizens have the right of steering local conditions via local popularly elected institutions. "*Innbyggerne har rett til å styre lokale anliggender gjennom lokale folkevalgte organer*" (Kongeriket Norges Grunnlov § 49). The Norwegian construction of multi-level government implies that on the one hand, all actions by the (*fylkes*)*kommuner* are based on powers derived from the state; on the other hand, the local level is by the law guaranteed some room of discretion. In an inter-European comparison, Norway, as the other Scandinavian countries, scores high for levels of local autonomy (Jacobsen 2020, p. 243).

Sellers and Lidstrøm (2007) further examine the seeming paradox that although the Scandinavian welfare states are characterised by centralised policy-making, their local government infrastructure is among the most decentralised one in the industrialised countries. Examining the relationship between Social Democratic welfare states and strong local government, the authors argue that the empowerment of local governments was a *precondition* that opened up for the welfare state expansion. Two major arguments support this claim – powerful local governments offer the means required to implement universalistic welfare states and, possessing of community support, they also dispose of political resources for the egalitarian welfare state. The latter is important given that higher tax levels and extensive social aims of Social Democratic welfare states pose comparatively high demands on their citizens – thus, local governments guaranteeing civil society support "can provide national policymakers with crucial allies in efforts to impose these demands" (Selle and Lidstrøm 2007, p. 611). According to the authors, strong local government does not contradict a strong national political level as "what is given to the local level need not be taken away from higher levels" (Selle and Lidstrøm 2007, p. 611) and in some instances, strong local government can strengthen national government; within expanded state activity, both levels of government take on different roles.

The most important responsibility of the *fylkeskommuner* is secondary education. The *fylker* are also responsible for transport services, such as regional roads, ferries and public transport. Dentistry is another regional responsibility. The relative role of the single tasks is reflected in the regions' expenses – 47% of the spending goes to the education sector and 34% are spend on transport (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen 2020, p. 65).

The *fylkeskommuner* are also expected to develop regional plans – based on the law on planning and building – that should comprehend regulations on areas of specific regional interest, such as mountain areas stretching over different local municipalities (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen 2020, p. 49).

The county councils, the *fylkesting*, are, within the same election as the local councils, the *kommunestyret*, elected every four years. Measured in voter turnout, in Norway, interest in the elections to *kommunestyret* and *fylkesting* has always been lower than interest for and participation in national elections^v. In both the *kommunestyret* and the *fylkesting*, decisions are taken based on majority voting. Different from the national parliamentary system, no formal governments are formed – yet, parties tend to engage in stable forms of cooperation over the electoral period.

In most instances, the *fylkesting* is divided into several boards or committees. The *fylkesutvalg* is a board of at least five representatives in which several political topics are handled and which functions as a type of miniature *fylkesting*, reflecting its party-political composition and meeting at least twice as much as the *fylkesting* itself. The *ordfører* is the formal leader of the *fylkesting* as well as of the *fylkesutvalg* (Jacobsen 2020, p. 124 f.). The steering model based on having a *fylkesutvalg* is called *formannskapsmodell*; an alternative, but less common model of steering is *parlamentarisme* in which the board only consists of members of the regional political majority. In (*fylkes*)*kommuner* adopting a parliamentary system, a *fylkesråd*, a form of regional “government” is formed, led by the *fylkesrådsleder*.

Before the reform, Norway's regional system had been divided into nineteen *fylkeskommuner*. The Local Government Act, the so-called *formannskapslovene*, decided upon in the *Stortinget* in 1837, set the cornerstone for Norway's modern borders of local and regional government. The then 392 municipalities established majorly followed the Norwegian church's

^vIt is also assumed that local and regional elections are highly influenced by national politics and politicians and that the role of national as opposed to local politics is (even) higher at the regional than at the municipality level (Jacobsen 2020, p. 224).

administrative units. In the following 100 years, the number of municipalities expanded up to 747, to be reduced sharply, by about a half, between 1958 and 1967.

In addition to municipalities, the Norwegian subnational level of government had been divided into regional *amter*, originally established around 1660 during the Danish-Norwegian union, their number growing from twelve to 20 until the mid-1880s. In 1919, the *amter* were re-named into *fylker*. In terms of regional territorial borders, the only major change in the 20th century occurred in 1972, when Bergen was incorporated into Hordaland.

In 1975, direct elections to the *fylkesting* were introduced, the regional administration was separated from the *fylkesmann* and the position of the *fylkesrådmann* as the regional administration's leader was created (Jacobsen 2020, p. 169). Until 1975, the *fylkesmann*, the national government-appointed prefect, had held a much more central role, being the leader of the *fylkesutvalg* and the administration. The *fylkesting* had been indirectly elected, the municipalities belonging to a region sending their mayors. In general, the relationship between state and local level is seen to become more and more intertwined, increasing the level of mutual interdependence (Jacobsen 2020, p. 228).

In terms of identity, earlier studies have shown that in Norway, the connection to the national country is highest, followed by the local and then by the regional unit. According to the Norwegian population survey, the feeling of belonging to the municipalities yet scores very high (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen, p. 46 f.).

IV.II. The local and regional government reform of 2020

In 2002, the *fylkeskommuner* had lost their responsibility for specialist health service – *spesialhelsetjenesten* – to the state. Their main remaining tasks were regional planning and secondary education. In the 2000s, the left-wing government consisting of Arbeiderpartiet, SV and Senterpartiet initiated an attempt to reform the *fylkeskommuner*'s structure and tasks. Yet, only a “watered down act” was passed in 2008, comprehending minor changes to regional responsibilities, but no territorial reform (Blom-Hansen et al. 2012).

In November 2014, a report ordered by the Norwegian government and conducted by the research institute Møreforskning AS concluded that the *fylkeskommuner* Sogn og Fjordane, Aust-Agder and Finnmark were too small to further exist on their own. A precondition for regions to obtaining more tasks would be having 200,000 inhabitants and according to the report, it would be best to reduce the number of regions to between ten and 15. At that point, the minister for local government and modernisation, Jan Tore Sanner, however, stated that there had *not* yet been any decisions made on undertaking a regional reform (Weiby 2014).

In June 2015, the *Storting* agreed on that there still should be three popularly elected levels. The Norwegian government in the following invited the regions to engage in dialogues with their neighbouring regions, so-called *nabosamtaler* (Sanner 2015) and financial support was offered to regions that decided in favour of investigating a merger.

In April 2016, further information was published regarding the role, structure and tasks of the new regions (Meld. St. 22). In June 2016, the *Storting*'s majority supported the proposal for ten new regions.

In April 2017, the department of local government and modernisation issued a proposal for the new regional structure, envisaging the merger of Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder, Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane, Vestfold and Telemark, Oppland and Hedmark as well as Buskerud, Akershus og Østfold. It was noted that, in dialogue with the respective *fylkeskommuner*, a merger of Northern Norway into one or two regions should be further evaluated. Such was still expected to come into force by January 2020, that is at the same time as the other mergers (Prop. 84 S, p. 32). Yet, an internal agreement between the government and KrF did already at that point envisage a merger of Northern Norway into one or two regions (Dag Igvar Jacobsen, p. 27). The proposal was discussed and passed – with the smallest majority possible – in the *Storting* on 08 June 2017 (Stortinget 2017). The government also put into place an expert committee that should come up with tasks to strengthen the regions' role in developing society and giving better services to citizens and the economy.

On 01 January 2018, Nord-Trøndelag and Sør-Trøndelag were the first *fylkeskommuner* to merge, becoming the new Trøndelag region.

In February 2018, the expert committee delivered its report on new regional tasks (Ekspertutvalg 2018). In April 2018, the *kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartement* presented the proposal for new names for the new regions to the *Storting* (Prop. 65L).

In September 2019, the regular local and regional elections implied the first elections for the new *fylkesting*. On 01 January 2020, the regional mergers eventually went into force, with four regions remaining intact and the remaining fifteen merging into seven new regions.

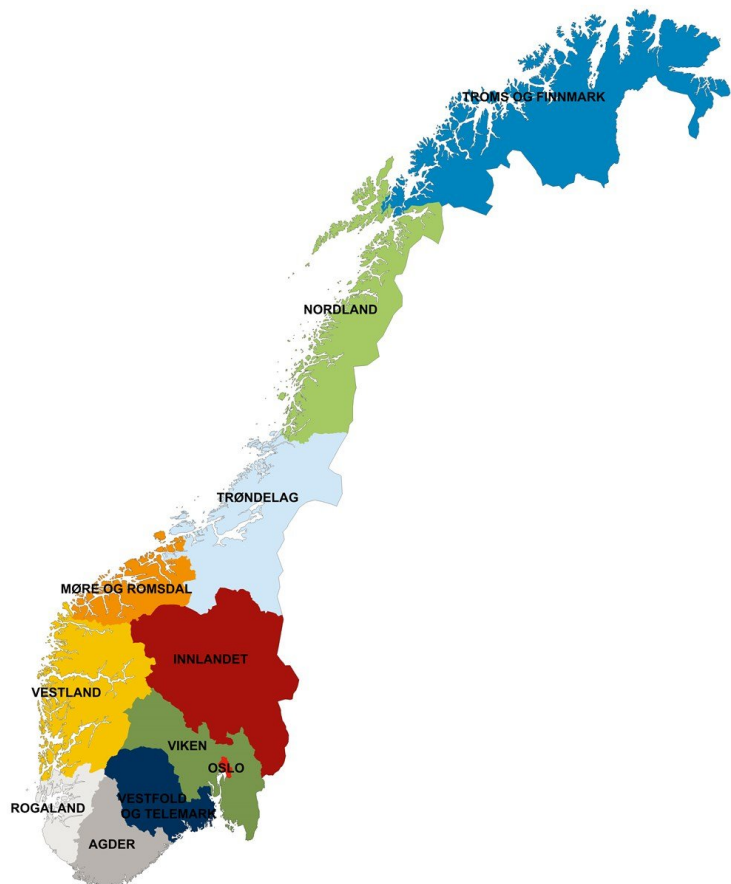


Figure 2: New regional structure by 2020. Source: Regjeringen.no. 2019. "Nye fylker".

The regional reform occurred partly in parallel to the reform of

municipalities in Norway. The latter comprised the merger of the local units, their number decreasing from 428 to 356 in 2020. Basically, at the national level, the then government of Høyre and Fremskrittspartiet that wanted to enforce the municipal reform had to agree on keeping and strengthening the regional level in order to secure the votes from its supporting parties KrF and Venstre (Klausen et al. 2019).

A guiding motive behind having larger municipalities and regions was that larger units would make it possible to delegate more and more demanding tasks from the national to the local level. Yet, there had for a long time been insecurity about *which* tasks actually would be delegated to the lower level(s) (Jacobsen 2020, p. 102).

Two committees were central to the preparation of mergers at the regional level. First, the *forhandlingsutvalg* were tasked with evaluating the possibilities for a merger and coming with a report or proposal for the new political-administrative structure. The establishment of *forhandlingsutvalg* was based on neighbouring *fylkeskommuner* agreeing to engage in

nabosamtaler. The *forhandlingsutvalg* did not have any formal decision power, but could make proposals to the *fylkesting*.

Fellesnemnder were set up *after* the *fylkesting* agreed on merging voluntarily or were forced to merge by the *Storting*. The *fellesnemnder*, typically consisting of an equal number of representatives from both regions and supported by subsidiary committees, constituted in the following, until the end of 2019, the main organ preparing the actual merger^{vi}.

The following chapters give a more detailed overview of the regional merger processes in Agder and Troms and Finnmark, respectively.

IV.III. The merger of Agder

Agder is Norway's southernmost region, as of today covering 16,434,27 km² and 305,244 inhabitants. (SNL 2021).

A merger of Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder had, *before* Norway's local and regional government reform, been discussed several times. Already in 2004, an agreement between the mayors of Arendal and Kristiansand on the distribution of tasks made a merger more likely; at this point locating the regional administration in Arendal, with Kristiansand obtaining the *fylkesmann*'s office, was thought of (Ludt 2004).

The two regions came close to a merger in 2010 when in the *fylkesting* of Vest-Agder approved an agreement in favour of a merger with Aust-Agder, based on the common intention to become stronger as one larger *fylke*. The decision on that matter was however dependent on the 2011-popular referendum in Aust-Agder into which the *fylkesting* in Aust-Agder went in with 18 against 17 votes to advise the population to vote in favour of a merger. In the referendum which, having a turnout of 60.4% of the people entitled to vote, turned out Norway's largest referendum out of 708 referenda between 1920 and 2011 (Aas 2012), about two third of the population of Aust-Agder conveyed their disagreement with a merger. Disagreement was largest in the Eastern part of Aust-Agder, with 80% in Arendal and 88% in Vegårshei voting against a merger (Breivik 2010).

In 2014, the *Storting* decided to merge the institution of the *fylkesmann* in Agder, still having offices in both Arendal and Kristiansand. The municipality and modernising minister Jan Tore Sanner informed that this was meant to strengthen the professional environment and, whereas

^{vi}Generally, it has to be noted that the role and active working period of the committees differed for all single merger cases. In Troms and Finnmark, the *fellesnemnda* was established just by the end of 2018, two years later than in Agder. In Agder, the *forhandlingsutvalg* started working shortly after the *fylkesting* agreed on merging in spring 2016, presenting its report in October the same year; in the case of Innlandet, e.g., a *forhandlingsutvalg* was established just in October 2017 (Innlandet fylkeskommune 2022). The size and composition of the *forhandlingsutvalg* varied, too.

the specialist departments would be gathered at one place, the long-term aim would be the merge the whole entity. The merger was to occur by 2016. Already at this point, the *Storting* member Freddy de Ruiten from Aust-Agder issued his concerns that this was a step towards an actual regional merger and that the new *fylkesmann* representing might represent more of a larger Kristiansand area than the entire region (Sellevold and Sundsdal 2014). The above mentioned [IV.II] report from *Møreforskning* published by November 2014 stating that Aust-Agder was one of the *fylker* too small to further exist on its own made a merger of the Agder-regions even more likely.

In April 2015, a group of experts founded by the minister for work and social affairs, Robert Eriksson, came with a report on how to make NAV more effective; one of their propositions was to merge the NAV offices in Agder and Trøndelag. Whereas the NAV-director in Aust-Agder took a positive stance on this suggestion, Freddy de Ruiten again expressed his concern that this was yet another step towards a merger of the Agder-*fylker* (Andersen 2015).

By April 2016, Jan Tore Sanner had issued the proposal to reduce the number of *fylkeskommune* from 19 to ten. The neighbouring talks between the Agder-regions did not yet give hopes for an agreement soon to come; some regional politicians, such as Randi Øverland (Ap) from Vest-Agder, were concerned that a merged Agder would anyways be too small, having less than 300.000 inhabitants. At that time the potential merger of Rogaland, Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane would have implied a region with more than 1.000.000 inhabitants. Øverland was thus in favour of inviting Rogaland at the table. On the contrary, there was still pronounced scepticism against *any* type of merger in Aust-Agder, with *fylkesordfører* Tellef Inge Mørland not being convinced by Sanner's announcement as just few new tasks were mentioned in the communication, the proposal thus being "*et politisk signal om et antall regioner og uten gulrøter for de som berøres*". Aust-Agder's population was particularly concerned about the future of the hospital in Arendal – even though hospitals de facto were *not* part of the reform – as well as job places and the role of Aust-Agder in a region centred around Kristiansand (Andersen and Gjestland 2016).

Yet, when measured empirically, resistance against a merger scored surprisingly low in Aust-Agder, 45% being against a merger and 39% being in favour of it, as found by a survey by Respons Analyse for the newspaper Fædrelandsvennen (FVN) and nrk Sørlandet. Resistance was, again, highest in the east of Aust-Agder, that is in the municipalities of Gjerstad, Risør, Tvedestrand, Vegårshei, Arendal, Froland and Åmli, with a share of 54% against a merger. In Vest-Agder instead, 54% were in favour of a merger, 25% against it and 21% had not made up their mind (Heggheim 2016a). Against this background, KrF in Aust-Agder decided against

proposing a new referendum, with a majority wanting to engage in negotiations with the neighbour in the West, as issued in a common proposal by Høyre, KrF, Fremskrittspartiet, Senterpartiet, Venstre, SV and MDG (Heggheim 2016b). In Vest-Agder, there had already been broad agreement on starting the negotiations and on 27 April 2016, the fylkesting in Vest-Agder formally decided to engage in negotiations with Aust-Agder on the merger, whereas a proposal for parallel negotiations with Rogaland was rejected with 19 to 16 votes (Sundsdal 2016).

Despite of these comparatively early agreements, in September the same year, Ansgar Gabrielsen, the former minister for economy, stated that the Agder-regions would have to hurry up if they did not want to be the small ones in-between two large regions – at that point, Rogaland, Hordaland and Sogn og Fjordane had intensified their merger negotiations. On the other hand, the *Universitet i Agder* (UiA) professor Jon P. Knudsen was concerned with the fact that there still had not been much concrete information on the tasks the new regions would be assigned (Andersen et al. 2016a).

In early October 2016, the *forhandlingsutvalget*, the interregional committee tasked with the negotiations presented its results, the “*En ny region Agder?*” report, voting with four against two stems in favour as a merger. By then, *fylkesordfører* Tellef Inge Mørland was still among the proponents of merging with Telemark or even with Telemark *and* Vestfold. The *forhandlingsutvalget*'s agreement anticipated the location of the *fylkesting* to Kristiansand, Arendal becoming the main location for the regional state institutions, i.e. for the the *fylkesmann*, NAV and *Statens Vegvesen*. Aust-Agder would obtain 422 and Vest-Agder would get 323 regional jobs (Sundsdal et al. 2016).

In the end of October, the *rådmann* of Grimstad spoke out in favour of a merger; Aust-Agder's second largest town was thus not afraid that Grimstad, Arendal and the Eastern parts of Agder would end up in the shadow of Kristiansand. The *rådmann* in Arendal, Harald Danielsen yet proved to be more sceptical expecting that the national institutions would later on be moved to Kristiansand, too – “*det er mest sannsynlig at hvis fylkesadministrasjonen havner I Kristiansand, så vil statsetatene følge etter dit*” (Sellevoid and Grov 2016). Danielsen also was in favour of including Telemark and potentially Vestfold, if merging. Contrasting these concerns, minister Sanner assured that if Vest-Agder and Aust-Agder merged on a voluntary basis, the *fylkesmann* would be located in Arendal, as desired by the two regions in their letter of intent, the *intensjonsavtale* (Weiby 2016).

The November 2016 population survey in Aust-Agder resulted in 50.1% voting against the merger, 41.8% in favour of it, 8.1% undecided. The survey was based on 2.500 participants and conducted by Opinion on behalf of Aust-Agder *fylkeskommune* (Jakobsen and Sundsdal 2016).

Against this background, on 13 December 2016, Aust-Agder *fylkesting* agreed to merge with Vest-Agder, with 19 against 16 votes. The *fylkesting* further asked the *Storting* to open up for adjusting regional borders as some municipalities in Southern Rogaland might have wanted to merge into the new Agder. The basis of the merger should be the “*En ny region Agder*” report. Høyre, KrF, Venstre, MDG and Knut Austad from Senterpartiet voted in favour of the merger and in the following, that is after their own proposal had been rejected, three out of four FrP representatives joined the proposal. In total, it took four voting rounds until a majority for the merger was obtained. Arbeiderpartiet voted against the merger stating that they wanted to respect the 2011 referendum. The day after, the *fylkesting* in Vest-Agder agreed on the merger with a large majority (Andersen et al. 2016b).

When the *Storting* in June 2017 officially decided on the respective regional mergers, it also announced that the *fylkesmann*'s administration would be located to Arendal (Skår and Sundsdal 2017).

Following up the *Storting*'s decision, the Agder-*fylker* held two *fellesnemnder* in 2017, seven in 2018 and six in 2019; in addition, they had several sub-committees tasked with elaborating on the further terms of the merger. The *fellesnemnda* itself was composed of 11 members from each Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder.

The merger of the two Agder *fylker* eventually went into force 01 January 2020. The new Agder consists of 25 municipalities, of which the largest one, Kristiansand with 111,737, has about one third of all inhabitants (Statistisk sentralbyrå 2022).

IV.IV. The merger of Troms and Finnmark

Troms og Finnmark is the least densely populated area in Norway, with little more than 3 inhabitants per square kilometre. Three quarters of the population live in cities and urban areas; 27% are based in Tromsø. It is also Tromsø that experiences the highest population growth in the region, growing with 32% in the last two decades – compared to 8% for the whole region (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen, p. 38). Only 4.6% of Norway's total population lives in Troms og Finnmark. Troms and Finnmark is the centre of Norway's Sami population; 65% of the people with a right to vote for the Sami parliament are based in the *fylke*. (Store norske leksikon 2021). Finnmark had been one of the regions that the Møreforskning report in 2014 considered too small to continue as an own *fylke*.

Following the government's initiative for a regional reform, in 2016, Høyre-politicians came with the suggestion of a large region in the North, covering all Nordland, Troms and Finnmark, which was yet met with resistance in the North (Tomassen and Møller 2016). Early discussions

between Troms and Finnmark on a potential merger turned out unsuccessful, as, according to Finnmark's *ordfører* Runar Sjøstand “[v]i står for langt fra hverandre” (Jakobsen and Lindquist 2016).

In 2017, the decision to split Northern Norway in two regions, that is a merger of Troms and Finnmark with Nordland remaining in its then form extension was confirmed by the leader of the *Storting's kommunal- og forvaltningskomite*, Helge Njåstad. Based on this new allocation, both of the regions would have about 240,000 inhabitants (Resvoll and Eilertsen 2017).

In June 2017, at a meeting at the *fylkesmann* offices, it was communicated that the new *fylkesmann* should sit in both Tromsø and Vadsø, with Vadsø obtaining the lead in this respect; staff should be located in both places and it was guaranteed there that would *not* be a loss of jobs in Vadsø (Rostad et al. 2017).

The following negotiation meeting between Troms and Finnmark still did not lead to an agreement on the merger; there was disagreement on how the new region should be organised, on the location of political and administrative institutions and on the new region's name (Mogård and Eliseussen 2017). The negotiations between the two *fylker* were few days later interrupted by Finnmark leaving the table. Finnmark's *fylkesordfører* Ragnhild Vassvik (Ap) explained this movement by the differences between the two regions being too large – “*vi kan ikke binde oss opp i noe som gjør det vanskelig å forhandle videre*” (Mogård and Lieungh 2017). Geir Ove Bakken (Ap) put it that way: “*Det er ganske fastlåst akkurat no. Eg føler ikkje at vi i Finnmark blir sett på som ein likeverdig partnar. Troms vil ha alt*” (Bruland 2017).

Later on in December, both Troms and Finnmark expressed their interest in obtaining help from the ministry for local government and modernisation, but minister Jan Tore Sanner stated he did not want to steer the process from Oslo (Furunes et al. 2017).

In January 2018, Finnmark criticised that only the Troms model should further be discussed, according to the press release Troms had send out a press release. Finnmark's model would have included an administration centred in Harstad, Finnsnes, Tromsø and Vadsø, with the administrative leadership in Vadsø and the political leadership in Tromsø, whereas Troms' model would gather both administrative and political leadership in Tromsø. Ragnhild Vassvik made clear that there had never been an agreement on rejecting the Finnmark model and Finnmark's delegation wanted to keep their organisational model in the discussions. Yet, Troms' *fylkesrådleder* Willy Ørnebakk did not want to have the administrative lead located in Vadsø (Tønset 2018). By the end of the month, it that time was Tromsø that interrupted the negotiations, asking the national minister to take action. Willy Ørnebakk explains Troms'

position in that “*vi allerede har strukket oss litt for langt, mens Finnmark har kommet med helt urimelige krav*» (Andreassen and Malmo 2018).

Monica Mæland (H), who in the meantime had taken over Jan Tore Sanner’s position as *kommunal- og moderniseringminister* appointed former minister of justice Knut Storberget (Ap) as a middleman for the negotiations. At the mid-February negotiations at Gardermoen, the actors arrived at a compromise that was agreed on by all negotiation partners.

Yet, back in Finnmark, Vadsø’s Arbeiderpartiet issued its disappointment about Finnmark’s negotiation result (Solvang and Hykkerud 2018). The disagreements over the Gardermoen agreement also led to internal controversies in Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet. Ragnhild Vassvik was met with strong criticism from Wenche Pedersen from Vadsø, calling her a “*nyttig idiot*”, a “useful idiot”, and Helga Pedersen suggested that Finnmark was being erased as a democratic arena. Both Wenche and Helga Pedersen went in for rejecting the agreement (Jensen 2018) and three weeks later, Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet rejected the so-called *Gardermoenavtale* (Trovåg and Furunes 2018). As a consequence, minister Mæland threatened Finnmark to take over the merger process *if* Finnmark *fylkeskommune* did not want to conduct it itself.

In mid-March, Finnmark demanded a stop of the negotiations until having consulted its citizens. The agreement in the *fylkesting* to hold a referendum was enabled by votes from Venstre and FrP, in addition to the left-wing block (Furunes and Trovåg 2018).

By May, Mæland threatened Finnmark to use population size as an indicator for the distribution of seats in the *fellesnemnda* – which would have implied significantly less seats given to Finnmark in relation to Troms – *if* Finnmark did not cooperate.

In the referendum held between 07 and 14 May 2018, 87% of the population of Finnmark stemmed against a merger with Troms, with a turnout of 58%. Monica Mæland nonetheless wanted to continue with the merger process pointing out that the *Storting* had agreed on the merger of Troms and Finnmark in both the current and the previous legislature, being well informed about the resistance in Finnmark when the decisions were taken. Neither Mæland nor *statsminister* Erna Solberg thus approved the referendum.

In June, Monica Mæland made clear to Finnmark *fylkeskommune* that a decision not to appoint members to the *fellesnemnda* would run against the law; in response to that, Ragnhild Vassvik pointed out that *Stortinget* itself possibly had broken the law in the course of the merger process (Furunes and Horn 2018). Finnmark indeed did boycott the establishment of a *fellesnemnda* by not appointing members. As a consequence, Monica Mæland chose to base the number of representants to the *fellesnemnda* on the respective population size, implying 19 members from Troms and 9 from Finnmark, thus basically opening up for Troms steering over Finnmark, the

committee being able to take on decisions even without Finnmark's participation (Furunes et al. 2018). Yet, Troms *fylkesting* did *not* want to engage in the *fellesnemnda* without Finnmark and once again asked minister Mæland to take over – who refused and instead invited both Troms and Finnmark to a further common meeting (Rypeng and Hansen 2018). Finnmark, however, refused to meet Troms and Mæland as they proposed joining the meeting could be read as a sign of giving up; so, eventually only Willy Ørnebakk from Troms travelled to Oslo (Hansen and Eriksen 2018).

Even though minister Mæland wanted to put the process on ice until October, already in the end of September the national government and KrF agreed on tasks for the new local and regional government, at the same time once again confirming the merger of Troms and Finnmark.

In October, Mæland's department concluded that Finnmark had broken the law, as stated in a letter to Finnmark *fylkeskommune*. By December, Finnmark, on its hand, evaluated to incriminate the state as, according to some lawyers, the decision to merge Troms and Finnmark had neither been in accordance with the law (Hesla and Hykkerud 2018).

On 06 December 2018 brought about the third “no” to Finnmark in the *Storting*, as voted on a potential reversion of the merger; on this issue, KrF voted alongside the government on non-reversing, resulting in a 53 to 50 votes outcome (Hesla and Bendixen 2018).

The following week, Finnmark eventually agreed to join the *fellesnemnda*, minister Mæland then agreeing to change the rules into establishing a committee with 19 representants from Troms and Finnmark each (Hykkerud 2018). The first so-composed *fellesnemnda* took place on 17 December 2018, followed by nine *fellesnemnda* meetings in 2019. In February 2019, at the annual meeting of Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet, cooperation between the Eastern and Western representatives had apparently improved (Reginiussen 2019). The merger of Troms and Finnmark went into force on 01 January 2020.

V. Empirical findings

V.I. Introduction to the category scheme

Interview findings have been coded in Nvivo according to the previously established coding scheme which has been supplemented by one further category, identity. The coding scheme is largely based on the main topics reflected upon in the interview guide and thus connected to the analytical framework. The scheme is divided into main categories and sub-categories, the latter giving a more detailed division of the information provided in the main categories.

The main categories are arguments, cleavages, cooperation between different actors, process description and assessment, the period after establishing the *fellesnemnda*^{vii}, the previous merger attempt [a category specific to Agder], strategies and entrepreneurs.

The argument category differentiates between arguments in favour of the merger, against the merger or in favour of a larger merger. The cleavage category is divided by content – centre-periphery, geography or left-right; although for one Node^{viii}, the type of cleavage – cross-cutting – is included, too. The cooperation and contact category differentiates by several types of actors – the administration, the business world, local media, municipalities, the national party branch, politicians of other parties in the *fylkesting*, the “neighbouring” regional branch of the same party, state actors such as the *fylkesmann* and trade unions. The process description category includes both general process descriptions as well as challenges, the handling of conflicts and “what went well”. Strategies are divided into *compensation*, *compromising*, *confusion*, *non-resolving conflicts*^{ix} and residual strategies.

A residual category and a category comprehending information on the interview object are added in order to leave no information uncoded.

The following section provides the empirical findings, essentially structured on basis of the category scheme. First, the standings of the different parties on a potential merger are presented, followed by (party-)political action aimed at influencing the decision in favour of or against a merger. Then, the interviewees’ perceptions of the merger process are depicted, followed by arguments applied by the different sides during the process and controversies present. The core subchapter of the empirical findings describes patterns of contact and cooperation. Finally, changes in cooperation after the establishment of the *fellesnemnda* and, for Agder, the impact of the previous merger attempt are depicted.

Approaching research design as an iterative process means a continuous back and forth between expectations and field realities (Haverland and Yanow 2012). Whereas the coding already implied a form of analysis, as by categorisation, the empirical findings are presented in a descriptive manner, thus not adopting the names of all of the categories of the categorisation

^{vii} This category thus contains information from both the situation once the *fellesnemnda* was established and from the period after 2020 when the merger went into force. However, information on the *fellesnemnda* period is, marked as such, also included into other parts of this chapter as it serves to better understand strategies and cooperation patterns. Especially in the case of Troms and Finnmark, a stricter division between the period before and after establishing the *fellesnemnda* might partly be misleading as it is pointed out by several actors that resistance to the merger was still prominent even *after* establishing the committee.

^{viii} Node is the Nvivo term for the single text fragments coded.

^{ix} *Extension of conflicts* had not initially been considered as a distinct strategy; it is therefore not included in the original category system, but has been incorporated into the analysis [VI.] later on.

scheme, but restructuring the findings in a consistent manner. Theoretical terms are picked up again in the analytical chapter [VI.]. Where deemed necessary, interview findings are supplemented with further information based on the consultation of newspapers. This serves to illustrate the context the actors' statements are embedded in.

The interview objects are referred to by the abbreviation of the *fylkeskommune* they represent(ed), in order of the conduction of interviews.

Table 3: Interview objects

Interview-ID	Regional party branch
AA1	Aust-Agder Arbeiderparti
AA2	Aust-Agder Høyre
VA1	Vest-Agder Arbeiderparti
VA2	Vest-Agder Høyre
F1	Finnmark Arbeiderparti
F2	Finnmark Høyre
T1	Troms Høyre
T2	Troms Arbeiderparti

V.II. Party-political standings – overview

First, a short overview over the positions of the different parties represented with more than just one representative in the *fylkesting* on the merger is to be given. This information is mainly based on the newspaper articles consulted.

In Agder, Høyre and Venstre were clearly in favour of a merger. KrF, too, voted unanimously in favour of a merger in Aust-Agder *fylkesting* on 13 December 2016. MDG, too, supported Høyre's proposal on the merger.

Arbeiderpartiet was more split, voting against the merger proposal in the *fylkesting* of both Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder in December 2016. However, in Vest-Agder, Arbeiderpartiet had a more positive stance on the merger, but would have preferred to include the neighbouring Rogaland into the new region (Flekkefjords Tidende 2016).

FrP was split on the merger issue, too. They generally would have preferred a larger new region. As a surprise to many, three out of their four representatives in Aust-Agder *fylkesting* yet eventually voted alongside Høyre's proposal for a merger of the Agder-*fylker*.

Two out of three representatives of Senterpartiet voted in favour of a merger in Aust-Agder *fylkesting*.

In the case of Troms and Finnmark, Høyre followed the national party's line in favour of a merger. Venstre has been characterised as the most pro-merger party [F2]. Fremskrittspartiet and KrF, the latter still experiencing internal conflicts on the issue, too, followed the national government and thus their parties making the case for the merger.

Arbeiderpartiet Finnmark was clearly against the merger, with Arbeiderpartiet Troms having a more pragmatic position; the latter cannot be called for open reform proponents, but worked in favour of enabling the best possible merger once the decision was taken nationally. Actually, some newspaper articles allow for the assessment that Arbeiderpartiet Troms largely *was* interested in the merger. In 2016, the then *fylkesrådsleder* Cecilie Myrseth stated that she was not surprised that Troms' inhabitants were more positive towards merging, as this would be in line with the political arena. "*Det er sånn jeg kjenner stemninga, også i det politiske miljøet. Og det er ingen hemmelighet at det er vi i Troms som ivrer mest for en sammenslåing*" (Kristoffersen and Barth-Heyerdahl 2016). Yet, at this point discussions were still centred around the option of merging all three Northern *fylker* – a constellation which would have put Troms in the geographical centre. In a comment article in Nordlys in 2018, Nils Aarsæther (Senterpartiet) proposed that Venstre, KrF, but also large parts of Troms Arbeiderpartiet had been entrapped by the idea of new and larger tasks to the new regions, thus engaging in favour of the merger (Nils Aarsæther 2018). Generally, it can be stated that Arbeiderpartiet Troms was more in favour of a merger than Arbeiderpartiet Finnmark was, but that it yet held an ambivalent position on the issue.

Senterpartiet was the most prominent reform opponent, gaining votes in the 2019 local and regional elections.

SV in Finnmark voted together with Arbeiderpartiet and Senterpartiet against the merger.

MDG and Rødt, the latter not represented in Finnmark *fylkesting*, have also been reform opponents.

Summing up, Høyre was in favour of a merger in all of the four former *fylke*, with Arbeiderpartiet being essentially positive towards merging in Vest-Agder and Troms, split in Aust-Agder and openly against the merger in Finnmark.

V.III. Party-political action for and against the merger

This subchapter looks at the action by regional (party) actors aimed at enabling or preventing the regional merger. It accordingly should provide information about strategic action during the merger process, which will be made further use of in the analysis [VI.].

Aust-Agder Høyre had been working on getting through the merger in Aust-Agder *fylkesting*. AA2 admits that this had been quite challenging and involved a lot of negotiations. They had taken in propositions from other parties into their proposal to the *fylkesting*. As there was no majority for FrP's preferred option of a larger region, Høyre could obtain some – three out of four – of their votes by including a paragraph stating that they on a longer-term basis could consider further enlargement.

The paragraph states that Aust-Agder *fylkesting* demands the Storting to open up for adjusting present regional borders in the course of a new arrangement of regions and that the municipalities located at the border need to have the option to choose the region they belong to. FrP had, according to its representative Bruun-Gundersen, been talking to several parties to get the point on border adjustments included in the proposal (Bruun-Gundersen 2016).

FrP's three representatives voting in favour of the merger came as a surprise to many; Arbeiderpartiet's AA1 acknowledges that they had not known FrP switched sides. The merger proponents had also included a paragraph on the districts to obtain votes from Senterpartiet [AA2].

A central point of discussion in the merger of Aust- and Vest-Agder was the distribution of jobs. Whereas the regional administration was located in Kristiansand, Arendal became the headquarter for the *fylkesmann* and the other state institutions, that is NAV and the Norwegian Public Roads Administration *Statens vegvesen*^x [AA1, AA2, VA2]. Furthermore, there was the *sikringsbestemmelse* within the agreement about 120 jobs that could be moved to Arendal given that some regional administration jobs did not necessarily have to be in Kristiansand; actually, in the aftermath, even more jobs and NAV's headquarters were located in Arendal [AA1]. AA2, who was involved in the drafting of the *sikringsbestemmelse*, states that this was meant to counteract negative feelings. In detail, it implied that if not as many statal jobs would be located to Arendal as estimated in their model, these would be compensated with jobs from the *fylkeskommune*, implying a partial splitting up of the regional administration, even though initially all of the administration should be based in Kristiansand. The *sikringsbestemmelse* has de facto been activated, so now some departments are located in Arendal [AA2]. The instrument of the *sikringsbestemmelse* is regarded as an important part of the agreement by AA1; it is also mentioned by VA2 who describes the situation as following – “*vi skulle jobbe for at Arendal skulle tiltrekke seg statlige arbeidsoppgaver og at Kristiansand skulle holde fingeren av*”. When *Statens Vegvesenet* was moved to the regions, 100 of 120 positions were given to

^x This distribution could be achieved by negotiations and agreements with the national level, as it is not the *fylker* that can decide about the localisation of statal institutions.

Arendal; yet, apparently no one in Kristiansand has been complaining about that, whereas Arendal gained a bit [AA1]. Arendal was also prospected to get more larger events, such as conferences [AA2]. According to VA1 – and in line with AA1 and AA2 –, Arendal won the most.

In terms of human resources, there had been a certain fear of missing key administrative staff, which is why transition solutions were conceived, such as economic support for people commuting between Arendal and Kristiansand [AA1]. This economic compensation was especially addressed at regional employees from Arendal that were not too enthusiastic about having to commute to Kristiansand; as of today, there still are many who commute, in both directions [VA2].

Another discussion was centred around whether to include Rogaland or Telemark into the new region. According to AA1, it de facto became clear quite early during the process that Rogaland did not want to join the merger, although Telemark was a little more interested. In Rogaland, only the negotiating delegations met, whereas in Telemark they had a common *fylkesutvalg* together with Telemark and both Agder-*fylker*; but according to AA2, Telemark itself was very negative, oriented to the East and there had not been much cooperation between Aust-Agder and Telemark, apart from some smaller municipalities located at the border. Vest-Agder on the other hand did not have anything with Telemark to do, so there was no political majority for it – “*en så at det ikke var realistisk, da var det ikke vits å bruke så mye krefter på det*” [AA2].

The school system might be seen as the first touch-stone [AA1] for the new region. For upper secondary schools, *videregående skoler* (VGS), in the districts, only a preliminary solution has been established. In the *fellesnemnda*, Arbeiderpartiet was concerned about the future of schools in the Western parts and in Setesdalen. In former Aust-Agder, a project was conceived for the schools which, due to the merger – as they were located more or less closely to Kristiansand –, were in danger of being laid down. AA1 considers this project as partly successful; so far, all schools have been kept, but *if* a system of free choice of schools should de facto been introduced, such would have negative implications, e.g. for the school located in Risør. Before the merger, Aust-Agder had been stricter in terms of *skolegrenser*, whereas Vest-Agder was more open to *fritt skolevalg*. The issue is also brought up by VA2, stating that they took a decision according to which there should not be any consequences in the first round, i.e., no school would be laid down or moved. VA2 stresses that a large share of the region’s work places is within schools. VA1, too, mentions a solution for keeping schools in the districts as a precondition for the merger – yet, in the aftermath there have already been attempts to lay down schools in the West.

F1 states that in order to prevent the merger, they, that is Arbeiderpartiet's representatives, made use of all legal political means; the referendum was organised – F1 as a *gruppelider* did, together with the *fylkesordfører*, deliver its results to the prime minister Erna Solberg; F1 wrote letters to the editor and argued from the speaker's desk in the *fylkesting* and in party meetings. F2 characterises the location of the top leadership and headquarters as a problem symptomatic for several issues. “*Det tror jeg var mye symbolpolitikk, der hvor toppledelsen er, er makten, det er der de viktige beslutningene tas*”. In an attempt to resolve the issue, leadership was handled broader, setting in more leaders on a horizontal line – once it became obvious that the main leadership would sit in Tromsø, it became important for Finnmark to find a model that made it possible to disperse leadership, power and authorities. The outcome was that some divisions and leaders remained in Finnmark, with Finnmark's *fylkesrådmann* Øystein Ruud serving as a secondary administrative leader [F2]. If one administrative leader sits in Troms, his deputy leader should be located in Finnmark and vice versa [T2]. Yet, given that the political centre of gravity, the *fylkesting*, is located in Tromsø, in retrospect F2 does not consider the outcome as a satisfying one to Finnmark.

When asked about opportunities to make concessions to Finnmark, T1 mentions the agreement that both *fylker* should have an equal number of representatives in the *fellesnemnda*. This division was practised even though according to the *inndelingsloven* Troms should have had more representatives. “*Vi fant jo ut at det å ha like mange var en måte å gjøre det på for å kunne komme nærmere hverandre*” [T1].

After the establishment of the *fellesnemnda*, some areas were simply not harmonised within the new region. Schools in Finnmark, for example, continued to be steered after Finnmark's own model. Given that there was a political majority for reversing the merger, the new structure was expected to still allow for a future reversal. Basically, two different administrative systems were to be maintained; this principle was guiding throughout the *fellesnemnda* period. “*Vi skal ikke sementere en organisasjonsstruktur som gjør at vi ikke kan skilles igjen*” [T2]. Given that, neither synergies nor economies of scale were achieved by the merger [T2].

In conclusion, a major instance of party-political action in Aust-Agder was Høyre's supplement to the proposal to the *fylkesting* aimed at obtaining votes from FrP and Senterpartiet. The location of national jobs to Arendal and the instrument of the *sikringsbestemmelse* as well as compensation regulations for administrative staff commuting between Arendal and Kristiansand were further provisions politically agreed upon to enable a merger. Talks with

Rogaland and Telemark were advocated for by proponents of a larger merger; they were, however, once regarded as “unrealistic” not further pursued. Regarding the future of (smaller) VGS in Agder, with different systems being in place in Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder, only a preliminary solution was agreed on.

In Troms and Finnmark, the division of administrative leadership and the establishment of a *fellesnemnda* with an equal number of representatives from both *fylker* were steps to facilitate the merger.

V.IV. Actors’ process description and assessment

As described in the context chapter [IV.], the merger processes in Agder and Troms and Finnmark varied amongst other on the time dimension. In Agder, after engaging in *nabosamtaler* and the *forhandlingsutvalget* publishing its report in October 2016, the two regional parliaments both agreed on the merger in December the same year. Based on that, a *fellesnemnda* was established, holding meetings between 2017 and 2019. In Troms and Finnmark, the *fellesnemnda* was only established by December 2018, preceded by several rounds of negotiations in form of *nabosamtaler*, a mediation in Gardermoen and three national decisions in favour of merging the two Northernmost regions. Both regions eventually merged on 01 January 2020.

At the beginning of the interviews, all actors were asked to give a short description of the merger process. This question has been answered differently by the different interviewees – whereas some gave a more descriptive account of the process, others issued their personal opinion or evaluation of the process. The different modes of answering the question can be considered as a finding in itself and will further be discussed in the analysis [VI.].

AA2 describes the preparation of the merger in the *forhandlingsutvalget* which consisted of one representative from Høyre and Arbeiderpartiet from Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder each. In that committee, which also was tasked with evaluating the relationship to Rogaland and Telemark, the representatives went through the whole organisation to come up with a model to see the positive and negative consequences of a merger. This approach is different from some other *fylkeskommuner* that first took a general decision to merge and just then started to work on the modalities of *how* to merge. In Agder, they did the opposite and drafted an extensive report together with the administration in the forefront of the decision in the *fylkesting*.

The *forhandlingsutvalget* served the political orientation as well as for preparing the actual merger. They also had frequent contact to state actors, the municipalities, NHO and

employee's organisations in order to obtain a comprehensive overview. The idea was to "*lage et skjellet at hva skulle den nye organisasjonen bli – det var jo en stor prosess som involverte mange*" [AA2]. All major discussions were taken up in the *forhandlingsutvalget*, so several points – such as the administration's location and the distribution of jobs – were already set when the proposal was treated at the *fylkesting* – "*vi hadde et veldig godt beslutningsgrunnlag*". The *forhandlingsutvalget* eventually did not come to a common agreement, but submitted one majority proposal with four votes and one minority proposal with two votes. The structure of the new Agder is de facto to a large extent based on the report [AA2].

For Aust-Agder, AA1 notes that over a certain period there was a lot of engagement for keeping the old *fylke*; there was engagement from the citizens in the forefront of the decision; many people were for example afraid to lose their local hospital, even though the hospitals were not part of *regionreformen*. In AA1's opinion, the fear of losing everything to Kristiansand was rather a psychological phenomenon than matter-of-fact based.

AA2 also mentions the citizens' role as many reacted to the fact that at the political level, they took up discussions on a merger few years after the *folkeavstemningen* of 2011 which had brought a clear result against a merger. There thus were very harsh discussions in the media and a lot of attention drawn to the issue – also because they then decided not to have another *folkeavstemning*, but just the so-called *innbyggerundersøkelsen* that made them less bound by the result. AA2 states that the resistance in the media was challenging to them as politicians; being one of the front figures for driving the merger in Aust-Agder, AA2 also got most of the blame in the forefront of the decision. Whereas AA2 had experienced good cooperation with Arbeiderpartiet's *fylkesordfører* even before, the discussion climate was rougher in debates with external people. Resistance can clearly be seen to have been more pronounced in the East than in the West [VA2].

Later on, discussions were rather centred around details in the distribution, such as where the regional capital would be located; many municipalities in easternmost Aust-Agder were afraid to end up too far away from the new centre, thus becoming an outskirt, whereas Arendal was afraid of losing jobs and activity to Kristiansand. There had been a tense relationship between Arendal already from before, with Arendal feeling somewhat inferior. "*Arbeidsplasser og aktivitet var kanskje den største diskusjonen og kanskje litt sånn avstand til makten*" [AA2].

Generally, the interviewees report of a good atmosphere during the process, with the partial exception of VA1. Both AA1 and AA2 note that the employees were good taken care of and

people commuting between Arendal and Kristiansand obtained good regulations for that. AA2 also notes that the *fylkesting* and especially the actors central to the merger process, such as the *forhandlingsutvalget*, obtained good insights into the administration's work. Regarding the work in the *forhandlingsutvalget*, AA2 stresses the very good internal dialogue – “*selv om det ble mindretallsforslag fra Arbeiderpartiet fra begge sider, var det veldig god prosess i forhandlingsutvalget*”.

Agder's merger process can thus be called a successful one. In the aftermath, splitting up was no longer part of the discussions, no services were kept divided; once the decision was taken, all were in for finding the best possible solution [AA2]. VA2 sees the fact that Agder merged voluntarily as their strength – it had been a process where the *fylker* collaborated until the point where it was natural to take the last step, i.e., the merger. VA2 yet notes that merging surely was less hurtful to Vest-Agder than it was to Aust-Agder.

Outlining the merger process in Troms and Finnmark, F1 notes that before joining the *fellesnemnda*, a political process took place within the parties, with Arbeiderpartiet agreeing at an early stage that they did not want to merge.

F2 took part in the *forhandlingsutvalget* leading the discussions with Troms before the establishment of the *fellesnemnda*. Whereas Finnmark's delegation consisted of representatives of four different parties, Troms send its *fylkesråd*, thus no opposition parties were represented. The *forhandlingsutvalget* eventually delivered its results to the common *fylkesting*; it thus did not have any formal decision power in itself.

With no progress in the negotiations between the regions, Knut Storberget, an Arbeiderpartiet politician from Southern Norway, *statsforvalter* in Innlandet since 2019, was appointed as a mediator. Referring to the negotiations at Gardermoen, F1 states that “*det var lagt opp til nokså målrettet forhandlingen fra Storberget sin side*”. When the Gardermoen agreement was presented to F1 in his function as the party's *gruppeleder*, F1 advised the *fylkesordfører* not to sign the agreement as it could have been misunderstood weakening Arbeiderpartiet's position in Finnmark.

“*Jeg opplevde prosessen som ganske dårlig – vi satt rundt et bord og skulle diskutere ting som man politisk hadde bestemt at vi ikke skulle gjøre*” [F1]. According to F1, the initial *nabosamtaler* were characterised by Troms wanting the merger more than Finnmark did and by Troms not wanting to cede anything to Finnmark. In some instances, Troms would have come with proposals that Finnmark did consider interesting, but then taken back the proposal in the following meeting.

The role differences between Troms and Finnmark depicted by F1 fit with the picture F2 draws. To F2, the largest challenge in the process was that Finnmark was not met as an equal partner throughout the negotiations, but as a little brother, a *“lillebror”*. These interview statements are supported by the consultation of newspaper articles, e.g., by Arbeiderpartiet’s Geir Ove Bakken’s statement in 2017: *“ Eg føler ikkje at vi i Finnmark blir sett på som ein likeverdig partner. Troms vil ha alt ”* (Bruland 2017).

To F2, as a Høyre politician, working on the merger in spite of considerable public opposition posed another challenge. This would also apply to Arbeiderpartiet’s front figures that eventually had to conduct the merger, being met with even more criticism. *“Av og til så kan det koste mer enn det smaker å holde på med politikk”* [F2].

T1 describes the merger process as long-enduring and dramatic. From a Troms point of view, it sometimes was difficult to comprehend the resistance in Finnmark. T1 comes with the example of a meeting scheduled in Alta in June 2018, when it only became public that none of the representatives of Finnmark would meet up right before Troms’ delegation’s flight should have left. When asked about the largest challenge, Troms’ representative recalls the fact the Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet did not want to merge; T1 also notes that in some cases, agreements were made and then taken back, such as in the case of the Gardermoen agreement. *“Det nærmeste jeg kan sammenligne det med, det var Alta-aksjonen og EU-kampen i [19]72, det er omtrent på det nivået, det var mann mot mann”*. T2 highlights that the merger process was extremely challenging, amongst others because of the different forms of political leadership in Troms [*parlamentarisme*] and Finnmark [*formannskapsmodell*]. These differences later also played out *after* establishing the *fellesnemnda* and in the new *fylkesting*, given that Finnmark’s representatives had no experiences with working under a parliamentary model. T2 generally stresses that none of the partners actually wanted to merge. This stands in contrast to T1’s statement that Troms in general had a positive attitude towards a merger of Northern-Norway. Whereas the three Northern regions would have been cooperating well over several years, being *forced* to merge into one common organisational structure, was different. *“Problemet var rammevilkårene vi ble tvunget inn i”* [T2].

Finnmark’s economic difficulties constituted a further issue; the region had taken up a large credit right before the merger that was included into the shared economy of the new *fylke*. T2 underlines that the economic structure in Troms and Finnmark was characterised by large contrasts between the *fylker* and within Finnmark. *“Bare Finnmark er jo fire forskjellige områder med fire forskjellige infrastrukturer og næring, altså Indre Finnmark kan ikke*

sammenlignes med kysten [...], også har du Troms som er et forskingsmiljø, som er kompetansearbeidsplasser som olje og gass”.

In terms of conducting the merger, T2 criticises that once enforced to merge, Troms and Finnmark were in need of the resources and tasks to build the new region; yet, they obtained neither the tasks nor the resources. In that context, T2 agrees on the premise that a regionalisation of the new Troms og Finnmark could have lifted up the regional economy – but in absence of new resources, the merger stranded in a “lose-lose” situation.

The substantial opposition in Finnmark, also at the administrative level, posed a further challenge.

Another challenge encountered was of infrastructural nature, with some municipalities in Finnmark being difficult to reach during winter [T1].

When asked about how conflicts were handled, T1 comes with the example of the decision whether to go for a parliamentary or a *formannskapsmodell*. The main reason to continue with a parliamentary model was the good experiences Troms had had with parliamentary steering in different constellations. F2 had been *against* parliamentary leadership – even though F2’s party Høyre nationally is in favour of it. According to F2, it would have been helpful to start with a *formannskapsmodell* through which all parties could have been represented in the most important committee, implying a different level of openness than a *fylkesråd* in which discussions would forego in a more closed setting. Given the clear political majority, negotiation processes would be less transparent, making it more difficult for the citizens to follow the political process. “*Hvis du ser streaming av fylkesrådsmøter, så er det ingen som diskuterer, alle stemmer for alle tilhører jo samme gruppering, alle sitter jo i posisjonen*” [F2].

T2 says the issued easiest to resolve was whether to have one or two regional coats of arms. “*Jeg mener jo at vi løste det meste gjennom arbeidet som ble gjort, både organisasjonsstrukturen, dette med lokasjonen, dette med at fylkesrådet har kontorsted begge plasser*” [T2].

F2 highlights that once there was the political agreement on the merger of Troms and Finnmark, “*så vakte det jo store reaksjoner, særlig i Finnmark*”. F2 explains that given the delay, the *fylker* did not have much time for conducting the process, including the mediations in Gardermoen. In following common meetings with Troms, they discussed more detailed issues, such as the type of political steering. An *ansettelsesutvalg* was then tasked with appointing new leaders for the new areas.

The lack of time for the merger of Troms and Finnmark can be confirmed by the consultation of other sources. In Finnmark Dagblad (Hansen 2017), for example, Willy Ørnebakk notes that many of the regions in Southern Norway had used more time for *nabosamtaler* the previous year. This is in agreement with what has been pointed out in Agder where they did *not* start the merger process at zero after the formal decision, but already had come with a detailed report.

T1 notes that in Troms, the initial discussions were centred around a merger of all three Northern regions of Norway, with a majority of parties, including both Høyre and Arbeiderpartiet, being open to that constellation. When at the national level, the decision was taken to merge Troms and Finnmark, the main standpoint in Troms would have been a pragmatic one – “*ok, da blir det sånn da*” [T1]. T1 mentions several times that as representatives of Troms, they sometimes were not aware of the level of resistance in Finnmark, such as when a meeting in Kirkenes in October 2018 to establish the *fellesnemnda* ended without any concrete results.

Attempting to draw a conclusion based on previous deliberations, T2 states that the main take-away of the case of Troms and Finnmark would be not to enforce a merger process. Merger processes would on the contrary have to be based on voluntary agreements and bottom-up initiatives. “*Altså prøv å si til en fireåring ,du skal spise gulrøtter før du får lov å spise karamell’*”.

In essence, in Agder, the *forhandlingsutvalget* played a crucial role in preparing the report that served as a basis for the new regional structure. Citizen engagement for keeping the old regional structure was primarily present in Aust-Agder. The merger of the Agder regions is largely described as a good process, contrarily to the significantly more conflictive merger of Troms and Finnmark. The latter, too, comprehended the instrument of a *forhandlingsutvalg* and a *fellesnemnda*; it yet was more of an interrupted process, accompanied by negotiations at or with the national level. Public opposition in Finnmark posed a challenge to the process.

V.V. Arguments

The arguments brought in by the actors in favour or against a merger depict both their standings and their framing of the situation. They can often be traced back to the traditional discussions around territorial reforms.

A prominent argument in Aust-Agder was that Arendal would be eaten up by Kristiansand; Arendal being considered as somewhat of a *lillebror*, given the differences in population size [AA1]. Furthermore, the very East in Aust-Agder would become an outskirt [AA1]. Concerns

about further centralisation – implying longer distances to where power is located – and an expected loss of jobs to Kristiansand has yet been shared by Aust-Agder and the westernmost parts of Vest-Agder [AA1, VA1]. Both also feared that schools (in the outskirts) would be laid down.

Instead of being against a merger per se, some actors also argued in favour of a larger merger, including either Rogaland or Telemark. Some representatives of Vest-Agder would argue that including Rogaland would make the new region even stronger, while at the same time moving the centre of gravity westwards [VA2]. In Aust-Agder, on the other hand, some representatives wanted a merger with Telemark. The logic behind those optional inclusion of further *fylker* is thus centred around the idea of “being in the middle” – which is explicitly stated by AA1 and in line with VA1’s explanation that including Rogaland and Telemark would have implied having *more than just two* large towns, so power would be more divided. Some representatives had also simply considered a merged Agder to still be too small as a region on its own [VA1, AA2].

VA1 criticises that there had not been much of actual negotiations with Rogaland – apparently, such talks were refused by the governing majority. According to VA1, further talks with Rogaland would have made the process “more democratic” as that there is a difference between arguing for an issue, losing the argument and no discussion taking place at all. Apparently, amongst others, cultural arguments had been brought up by opponents of a merger with Rogaland. “*Det var en som sa at kulturen til folk fra Rogaland, den var så spesielt at den komme ikke til å gå – det var der jeg sa ganske høyt ifra talerstolen at på en skole jeg jobbet for da, da hadde vi elleve barn fra Rogaland og jeg kunne si at det var akkurat samme kulturen som vi hadde i Vest-Agder*” [VA1].

Aust-Agder’s AA2 would also have considered further talks to Rogaland interesting, given that Agder and Rogaland have a lot in common; they are similar in their way of organising schools and within the business world in matters of coast and offshore. Yet, AA2 states that politically, there was no realistic majority for including Rogaland.

AA1, AA2 and VA2 share a central motive *in favour* of the merger – Agder having traditionally been closely connected, “*sammenvevd*” [AA2], and cooperating, it was about time to merge. The two *fylker* had come as far in cooperating as possible by “just cooperating”, it thus was “*overmodent*” [AA1] to take the last step [VA2]. Cooperation had especially been well established at the *fylkesting* level; they shared a regional plan as the main planning document and the university was located both in Kristiansand and Aust-Agder’s Grimstad [AA2].

Another prominent argument was the region's size – both Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder were considered small *fylker* on their own [AA2, VA2]. Therefore, merging would allow Agder to become a stronger regional driving force [AA2], obtaining a larger voice at the national level [VA1] and it would open up for scale effects. Merging would make many functions cheaper, having larger employee's associations and economic gains by having just one *fylkesordfører* and just one headquarter for regional administration and also the industry would benefit – “*næringslivet ville få flere bein å stå på*” [VA1]. Also related to the region's size is the role of a lot of small municipalities in Agder, especially Indre Agder, for which the region has to be a good cooperation partner; it is thus about having a *fylkeskommune* that can deliver on the large tasks of the future [VA2], such as schools, regional development and culture.

Despite of being from Aust-Agder, AA1 acknowledges that Kristiansand as Norway's fifth largest town naturally constituted the centre – such as for transport – of Agder anyways and, in geographical terms, in the new region it actually would be located in the middle, rather than to the West.

In Finnmark, there was large-scale resistance against the merger with Troms. The outcome of the May 2018 referendum, with 87% of the voters participating voting against the merger, can be seen as an indicator of that. The fact that the referendum was used as an argument against merging is brought up by both F1 and F2.

F1 refers to democratic concerns in explaining why Finnmark did not want to merge – they were afraid of losing Finnmark's representation in a larger region with the headquarters located in Tromsø, also implying larger distances to the *fylkesting*. According to F1, strengthening a region is easier if the region is smaller, i.e., in Finnmark *fylkesting*, resources could easier be used in a targeted manner than in a merged region with Troms. Given the larger share of the population residing in Troms, the political centre of gravity would have been moved to Troms, implying a centre-periphery axis that could pull resources out of Finnmark. A region with the “*kjøttvekt*” lying in Troms would thus make it more difficult to account for Finnmark's interests.

F1 also refers to a colonial approach, “*kolonitilnærming*”, suggesting that Finnmark had during the years been treated like a colony by the national institutions. Whereas Finnmark would be rich in resources both in the sea and at the country side, over several generations, others would have exploited these resources, taking the profit out of the region. F1 suggests that the merger process had again strengthened this effect. Fishing, windmills and mining in Kirkenes are listed as instances of how profit of Finnmark's resources is made outside the region [F1]. Fishing,

e.g., had been a crucial industry to Finnmark, yet once it had required the use of larger trawlers, fishing was taken over by people from central regions in possession of the capital needed. Kirkenes on the other hand had been established as a mining community, with the headquarters initially located in the town itself – however, once the mines started to create profit, the headquarters were moved to Oslo.

F2 explains the resistance against merging in Finnmark with the very concrete fear of losing jobs and the uncertainty of the future role of Eastern Finnmark. F2 also mentions that these were quite well-known arguments, related to the more general discussion of districts losing as opposed to the centres. F2 also notes that in Finnmark, especially in Vadsø, it was communicated that, in the case of merging, they would suffer and lose jobs; yet F2 criticises this standpoint. “*Det tror jeg faktisk var lite smart å fremstille Finnmark som at vi ikke kom å klare oss.*”

F2 also refers to the role of Finnmark’s identity during the merger process, yet does not share that position. In F2’s opinion, the *fylker* were an administrative level and even in the event of a merger, *finnmarkinger* would still be *finnmarkinger*.

With respect to the distance to the new *fylkesting*, F2 assumes that by now about none of Finnmark’s inhabitants would know their political representatives. On the other hand, already in the former Finnmark *fylkesting*, just a small number of people *would have* known the representatives, with some citizens not even knowing who lead the *fylkesting*. “*Man visste hvem som satt i kommunestyret sitt, mens fylkestinget ble nok litt fjerne*” [F2].

In Troms, there apparently had been less distinct arguments against merger – although the fact that it was an enforced merger was discussed [T1]; given the national-level decision on the merger, they did not have a choice to opt against at the regional level [T2]. T2 refers to the *Nordområdeprosjekt* around 2005 in the context of which the three Northern-Norwegian regions had discussed further cooperation, but agreed on still wanting to be three separate *fylker*. Contrary to that, T1 suggests that within the discussions around *regionreformen*, in Troms, there would have been a political majority for a merger of all three Northern-Norwegian *fylker*. T2 notes that the large distances in Troms og Finnmark would require financial compensations – “*skal vi drifte et fylke på størrelsen av Danmark pluss Schleswig-Holstein, så må vi ha penger til å fly imellom*”.

In terms of arguments in favour of a merger, F2 refers to the role of robust professional environments required for transferring tasks from the national to the regional level. At that point, F2 notes that there had previously been challenges for infrastructure projects in Finnmark, given the low competency present and the struggle to attract skilled workforce. In

addition, Finnmark *fylkeskommune* was seen to struggle economically [F1, F2, T2] and it was encountered by a sinking number of pupils at the schools. According to F2, some of these challenges could have been solved by merging into a larger unit. “*Det var ikke sånn at alt var gull og godt i det gamle Finnmark.*” F1 also touches upon the economic challenges in Finnmark, yet comes to another conclusion that F2 – Finnmark would be best supported by remaining an independent *fylke*. F1 states that a market economy is not working in Finnmark given that there are too few people spread over a large territory – which requires more targeted action. “*Mange av oss tror ikke at man er i stand til å ivareta Finnmark sine interesse gjennom et fylkesting med kjøttvekt og et sentrumspunkt i Troms.*” A more current issue related to that is massive population flows out of the municipalities in Finnmark, with the exception of Alta. A recent analysis by Menon for the municipalities in Varanger confirms that the population is decreasing and will decrease further if no countermeasures are taken. (Eastern) Finnmark is thus in need of immigration [F1].

Becoming a stronger region to deliver on regional tasks, taking up on tasks previously located at the offices of the *fylkesmann*, is brought as an argument in favour of the merger by T1. The merger would also imply obtaining a strengthened role in the Norwegian political landscape. T1 mentions that the idea of a Northern-Norwegian region had first been brought up by Arbeiderpartiet. This remark is supported by an article in Harstad Tidende (Jensen 2016) in which the mayors of Harstad and Narvik, both Arbeiderpartiet, demanded a common Northern Norwegian region.

Although not initially foreseen in the questionnaire, identity is an issue brought up by several respondents, particularly when describing the case of Finnmark. Identity is thus applied as a further argument *against* merging in Finnmark, whereas in Agder, the identity question has contributed positively to the issue. According to AA2, there had been a common Agder identity at place even before merging.

Before outlining the merger process, F1 draws attention to the fact that Finnmark is widely different from the central regions in Norway, constituting a meeting point between the Sami, the Finnish and the Norwegian coastal and fishery culture. “*Finnmark er det de tre stammer møtes*”. F1 stresses that Finnmark is different from the rest of Norway in a more distinct way than for example Trøndelag is different from the rest of the country; Finnmark’s distinctiveness is of a more real and geographic nature.

F2, too, underlines that the role of identity in Finnmark had been central to the merger discussion, yet taking a more critical angle on the matter. According to F2, the discussion around identity has been mixed with more concrete questions on the division of tasks.

According to F2, merging with Troms would not and did not imply that Finnmark's identity would cease to exist – "*selv om vi er sammenslått, så er vi ikke noe mindre finnmarkinger*". T2 also regards the identity question as a crucial moment to the eventual failure of the merger process. Drawing lessons from the process, the Troms Arbeiderpartiet representative states that a national government should *never* take on a process of that type. T2 refers to identity as a decisive factor in the case of Viken, too. "*Østfoldinger er østfoldinger og har alltid vært østfoldinger og kommer aldri til å bli noe annet, kommer aldri til å bli vikenværing*". Yet, T2 admits that within Troms, regional identity has been less distinct than in Finnmark as in Troms and a person's identity would primarily be tied to its local town or municipality. Finnmark can thus be considered unique in a Norwegian context. T2 suggests that not fully being aware of Finnmark's distinct position might have been the cardinal error made by the national government when enforcing the merger. In line with F1, T2 points out that Finnmark has always been an outpost in Norway, characterised by the struggle against the central powers and geographical conditions.

A disclaimer should yet be made with respect to Finnmark's distinct identity. Whereas several respondents [AA2, F1, F2, T2] refer to a *finnmarking* identity different from the rest of the country, there still are different identities within Finnmark – the *kvensk*, Sami and the coastal fishery culture, as listed by F1. The common Finnmark identity is thus internally nuanced.

In conclusion, the fear of losing power and jobs to the larger centre was a prominent argument against the merger in both Aust-Agder – and, to a certain degree, the westernmost parts of Vest-Agder – and Finnmark. In the case of Agder, instead of arguing against a merger per se, some actors came with reasons for a larger merger, including Rogaland and / or Telemark. The arguments for an inclusion of further *fylker* focused on the aim of dividing power, instead of concentrating it in Kristiansand [and Arendal], and on the suggestion that even a merged Agder would still constitute a very small region of its own.

Becoming a larger region better equipped to deliver on regional tasks, benefiting from scale effects and obtaining a larger voice at the national level is central to the line of argumentation of reform proponents in both cases. In Agder, the previously established close cooperation between the two regions is brought up as a further motive for merging.

In Finnmark, the distinct identity of the population of Finnmark constituted a central argument against merging. The 2018 referendum with a large majority voting against the merger has been *applied* as an argument against merging by Finnmark's political merger opponents.

V.VI. Cleavages and controversies

The arguments listed above *refer to* different controversies which will be presented at this point. Controversies, e.g., about where to locate a hospital, are assumed to arise over cleavages such as the centre-periphery cleavage. Arguments, again, build on those underlying patterns of conflict, expressing actors' standpoints on the former.

VA1 perceived the discussions to have been centred around Kristiansand and Arendal, whereas the smaller municipalities did not have a say and everything quasi-naturally was divided between the larger towns. As a representative from the Western outskirts, VA1 also states that power had been established even before – all parties had their headquarters in either Kristiansand or Arendal; by merging, further centralisation of power could be expected.

From an outcome perspective, the Western parts of Vest-Agder seems to have lost (the most) – the new centre is not only Kristiansand on its own, but, having Arendal as the second largest town, the centre of gravity has been moved eastwards [AA1]; a lot of meetings that first where in Kristiansand have now been moved to Arendal, Arendal has become a larger centre; representatives and individuals from the West of Vest-Agder now have an even longer way to the centre [VA1].

AA2 takes a more post-merger perspective on the location of services to the outskirts. The political discussion would often be about schools located at the outskirts, not because of them being outskirts, but because those municipalities are small and have few pupils, making it difficult to uphold *videregående skoler* there, while population growth is largest between the coastal towns. Maintaining a decentralised offer of services is about the balance between the districts and the quality. AA2 sees those discussions as political discussions related to geography, but not from an East against West point of view; it is rather the districts at both sides sharing the same position. An East-West dimension is especially seen in the traditional competition between Arendal and Kristiansand that also within the merger was centred about which town would get which positions [VA2].

The left-right cleavage seems to have gained prominence *after* the decision for the merger as discussions in the *fellesnemnda* were (party-)political discussions [AA1, AA2]. “*Så var det veldig store diskusjoner rundt skolesystem og inntak til videregående skoler og om hvilke linjer som skulle ligge hvor, om det skulle være fritt skolevalg eller ikke, hvordan en skulle ha inntaksområder – det var politiske diskusjoner, ikke Aust mot Vest, mer mellom partiene*” AA2].

The economic dimension was concerned with benefitting from economies of scale – merging into a larger unit was expected to bring positive effects in terms of competencies, which is a

position most of the interviewees touched upon on; a merged region was also expected to be better equipped for larger tasks delegated from the national level [AA2, VA1, VA2].

The role of size played in favour of the merger – both Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder were comparatively small regions in an inner-Norwegian comparison and thus expected to obtain benefits and a larger voice at the national level by merging [VA1].

In the case of Troms and Finnmark, a centre-periphery cleavage is mentioned by both F1 and F2. F1 explains that merging would have moved the centre of gravity towards Tromsø, whereas in former Finnmark there used to be a form of balance between the most populous town of Alta and Vadsø as the regional capital. Yet, in the course of the merger process, an East-West dimension had played a role *within* Finnmark, with the Eastern parts being the most pronouncedly against a merger [F1].

According to T2, the discussions were centred around compensating for one position in one place with two positions in the other one place.

F1 further stresses the geographic differences between Finnmark and the central regions of Southern Norway, Finnmark being characterised by larger distances to institutions such as hospitals, universities and cultural attractions.

As mentioned with regard to the arguments, one discussion arose around the question which size of the subnational unit was adequate in taking care of the citizen's interests. To F1, Finnmark itself was better equipped for handling Finnmark's challenges. T2 stresses that the size of Troms and Finnmark combined would have required further financial support in order to conduct a successful merger.

Obtaining a larger voice at the national level was an argument brought up by T1. In terms of size, on the other hand, both T2 and F1 stress Finnmark's size and the distances that would further increase in the new Troms and Finnmark

Economy was a further point of discussion in the context of the merger. Finnmark suffered from a weak economy and was expected to benefit from merging with the economically stronger Troms [F2, T1, T2].

In Troms and Finnmark, a controversy arose around the steering form of the future region. Whereas Finnmark had worked under a *formannskapsmodell*, Troms operated under a parliamentary system. Both *fylker* initially wanted to keep their respective system and once the decision for *parlamentarisme* was taken, Finnmark's representatives were seen to struggle as they lacked experience with this form of political leadership [T2].

To put it briefly, in both cases controversies arose on a centre-periphery dimension. In some instances, this dynamic played out between the two single *fylker* to merge, with Troms and Vest-Agder constituting the prospective centre, respectively. A centre-periphery axis was yet also present within the former *fylker*, between the larger towns and the geographical outskirts, that, by merging, would find themselves even more isolated. Further dimensions relevant during the merger discussion in both Agder and Troms and Finnmark were the role of size and economy. In Agder, a political left-right cleavage became more prominent after the establishment of the *fellesnemnda*. Specific to the merger of Troms and Finnmark was the controversy over which steering form to adapt.

V.VII. Cooperation / contact with other actors

The following chapter is about both contact to and cooperation between different actors. Cooperation is assumed to give information about common standpoints and the establishment or presence of alliances. Contact asks about the channels and forms of contact present and, in terms of contacting, about attempts of alliance building, which in detail will be discussed in the analysis [VI.]. The interviews de facto focused on *cooperation*, regarded as a precursor to alliances.

Regional party politics

In terms of party politics, at the *fylkesting*-level in Agder, many representatives had cooperated closely for many years, so most regional politicians were aware about how closely Agder was interconnected already back then [AA2]. A lot of the discussions were about the location of different jobs, the economy and schools.

When it came to preparing the merger, sitting in the opposition, Arbeiderpartiet Vest-Agder felt squeezed by the majority; they had to fight for all the positions they obtained, such as the deputy leader in the *fellesnemnda* [VA1].

Later on, in the *fellesnemnda*, they were very good discussions, yet highly based on party-political lines, where KrF held a whipping position as they steered with Arbeiderpartiet, Senterpartiet and SV in Aust-Agder, but with Høyre, KrF and FrP in the Vest-Agder [AA1].

Cooperation between the different parties of the former *fylkesting* in Finnmark is generally positively assessed – F1 describes the climate as positive and matter-of-fact based; F2 perceived large respect for the different standpoints, also within the *forhandlingsutvalget*.

T1 states that cooperation between regional politicians in Troms worked out well during the merger period. T2 recalls the discourse around potential differences between *fylkesrådsleder*

Willy Ørnebakk and the political majority, as he in some instances was perceived as more compliant [see entrepreneurs, V.VIII]. T2 describes the regional branch of Høyre as more lukewarm on the merger issue.

Intra-party-politics

Another question is how potential disagreement was regulated within the regional branches of the same party, that is within the former *fylkeslag* each.

A particular constellation can be detected for Arbeiderpartiet Aust-Agder that was quite split within its group, five of them being in favour of a merger and five against it. In order to solve the conflict, they contacted the higher level from which they obtained the clear order to vote against the merger – which all of the party's representatives in the *fylkesting* followed on 13 December 2016. “*Det er litt sånn Arbeiderpartiet jobber – når vi hører med medlemmer, så må vi høre på de*” [AA1]. This strict application of the party line principle in Arbeiderpartiet is also noted by Høyre's AA2.

In Vest-Agder, too, Arbeiderpartiet was partly split on the issue, with representatives at the school and in the districts being more negative towards the merger [VA1].

F1 elaborates that as a politician, one is bound to the political decisions made at a certain point – given that Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet had made a clear decision on not merging, the regional representatives were supposed to follow this decision. F1 describes the mode of cooperation within Arbeiderpartiet the following – usually, issues would be agreed on by deliberations and, in the last resort, majority voting in a closed room. When joining the *fylkesting* meeting, all representatives would stand in for the same position agreed on. Concerned with sending or not sending members to the *fellesnemnda*, they called in a *representantskap* meeting consisting of members of all local party branches, obtaining a small majority in favour of joining the *fellesnemnda*. In the *fylkesting*, one representative from Porsanger did not vote along the party line. This would under normal circumstances would be regarded as problematic, yet according to F1 in this case it was a good means of representing Arbeiderpartiet's internal disagreement on the issue. The handling of conflicts within Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet confirms the party's mode of operation as described by other interview objects, such as AA1 for Aust-Agder.

Contact between the regional branches of the same party

Contact also intensified between the two regional branches of each party in the new region. Whereas Arbeiderpartiet majorly was in favour of a merger in Vest-Agder, they were more against it in Aust-Agder [AA1].

Having been in touch with the party colleagues in the West, AA1 compares the concern of what would happen to places such as Flekkefjord and Lyngdal to concerns about Arendal and the Eastern parts of Aust-Agder shared by some representatives of Arbeiderpartiet Aust-Agder [AA1].

There were many meetings between the two regional branches of Arbeiderpartiet. During the *fellesnemnda* period, they had quite harsh discussions in the forefront of meetings as when they managed to gather, they would often obtain the majority in the *fellesnemnda*. An example for that is the *sikringsbestemmelse* mentioned earlier. Vest-Agder Arbeiderpartiet first was against this agreement, but, after consulting the steering level, they eventually agreed on it [AA1]. VA1 experienced the cooperation as quite exciting and had not known any of the other side before starting the merger. The regional party branches and the regional politicians met, having a very good tone, but different opinions. As also mentioned by AA1, they sometimes had quite severe discussions. About all topics had to be discussed several rounds before coming to an agreement; there were topics some voted in favour for and others voted against. These disagreements yet did never end up in individuals or the party branches being upset and not meeting up; they kept talking to each other and the group never actually split [VA1].

A different picture is given for Agder Høyre. The two *fylkeslag* had been cooperating closely over many years, having joint annual meetings – *fylkesårsmøter* –, thus regarding themselves as a unity already in the forefront of the merger – “*vi kjente oss som en del av Agder Høyre allerede*” [VA2]. They also send a shared delegation to Høyre’s national meeting or rather, two delegations working as one [VA2]. The *fylkestingsgrupper* from both regions had regular meetings. AA2 proposes that the good cooperation between Høyre’s two fylkeslag can be compared to the situation within KrF and Venstre, whereas Arbeiderpartiet was more split, having more split organisations [AA2]. The formal decision to merger into Agder Høyre was then already taken in January 2019 [VA2]. The close cooperation within Høyre and their agreement in favour of a merger allowed them to decide to contribute to the process at an early stage, taking somewhat of a leading role in it. It thus was Høyre’s *gruppeleder* in Aust-Agder and Høyre’s *fylkesordfører* in Vest-Agder that gave the first interviews once the discussions around the *nabosamtaler* started [AA2]. During the actual negotiations, Vest-Agder Høyre and Aust-Agder Høyre all had their own responsibilities, but according to AA2, there still was very good dialogue and no conflict at all.

F1 criticises that in the dialogue between Troms and Finnmark Arbeiderparti the differences in electoral success, with Finnmark Arbeiderparti coming close to an absolute majority in

fylkesting, were evened out in the negotiations, so Finnmark's political strength did not play out.

T2 gives a negative picture on cooperation between Arbeiderpartiet in Troms and Finnmark. According to T2, the largest problems in cooperation were not present in the contact the other parties, but within Arbeiderpartiet. This can be explained with Arbeiderpartiet being aware of having the majority in the *fellesnemnda* once they agreed on a solution – “*vi visste jo hvor kjøttvekta lå*”. The internal differences are illustrated by an example of the *fellesnemnda* period when internal discussions on the organisational structure of the future region two minutes before voting did not lead to inter-party agreement. These issues gave rise to more general dissatisfaction and the impression that the different party groups could not trust each other. Having been an active politician for several decades, T2 states to never have taken part in such a challenging process – “*det gikk på nervene*”. Contact between the two regional party branches had been close in the forefront of establishing the *fellesnemnda* in order to agree on the distribution of positions in the committee and the principal direction. This general form of agreement was yet not present at the level of details.

T2 also gives an account of the different forms of internal cooperation within Troms and Finnmark Arbeiderparti. In Troms, the party leadership would not steer the actions and decisions of their *fylkesting* representatives in detail, having given them the authorisation to work within the framework conditions agreed on. In Finnmark, on the other hand, “everything” passed via the leadership, e.g., when the representatives had to agree on a position in the *fellesnemnda*. This mode of working handicapped the process as several actors in the party leadership in Finnmark were clearly against the merger and, not sitting in the *fylkesting* themselves, did not have the responsibility to undertake and enable the merger.

Cooperation between Troms and Finnmark Høyre has been characterised by a lower level of conflicts [F2, T1]. The two regional party branches got in touch at an early stage, knowing that they would eventually form a common list for the upcoming elections. Høyre Troms and Finnmark also had their annual meetings together even before merging into one regional party. According to F2, establishing contact prior to merging helped Troms and Finnmark Høyre in gaining trust in each other – as of today, the *fylkestingsgruppe* of Høyre is working well together.

Contact to the national party branch

In the case of Agder, contact to the national political level was present in party-political terms as well as by more formal contact to the departments concerned [AA2].

Within Arbeiderpartiet, contact with the central level was established only via the individuals sitting in the party's *Sentralstyret*, but those were not directly involved in the process – which is why they were “gone” after the decision for the merger in the *Storting* [AA1]. VA1 also states that the national party level did not play a role in the process.

A different picture is given for Høyre that also led the national government at that time. AA2 states that there was contact with the national party branch and it was easy to reach out to then *kommunalminister* Jan Tore Sanner – who was in Agder several times – and that the *statssekretær* also was quite disponible. VA2 also mentions that minister Sanner followed up with what happened in Agder; Sanner yet *did not* have a hand over them forcing them to succeed; they felt free at the regional level to form the best organisation possible to them [VA2].

F1 was not involved in the contact with Arbeiderpartiet at the national level, yet assumes that there had been contact via Troms' and Finnmark's regional party leaders Cecilie Myrseth and Kristina Hansen.

Troms Arbeiderparti, both via *fylkesrådsleder* Willy Ørnebakk and, later on, the leader of the *fellesnemnda*, also had contact to their national party branch. Again, this is explained with the difficulties encountered during the merger process, especially around the internal conflicts between Finnmark and Troms Arbeiderparti. T2 states that at the regional level, they trusted the national party's standpoint against enforced mergers, enhancing the chances for an eventual reversing.

For Høyre, too, contact was established via the regional party leaders; in Finnmark, this was Jo Inge Hesjevik [F2]. The intensive contact can be explained by Troms and Finnmark taking more time for the merger process than the other regions – “*vi var jo helt på etterskudd*”. F2 issues doubts whether it was possible for the national government to understand the difficulties Høyre Finnmark encountered in the process and the fact that the merger had turned into a question of identity and feelings.

F2 further explains Høyre's position on the issue. Although Høyre did not come up with the initial idea of a regional reform, the proposal was supported by Høyre nationally [see context, IV.]. Based on that, for Høyre in Finnmark it was natural to follow their own government and engage in favour of the merger. In the aftermath, Høyre lost in the local and regional elections of 2019 as well as in the 2021 national elections in Finnmark, an outcome expressing the voters' dissatisfaction with *regionreformen* [F2].

In Troms, too, there was contact between Høyre's regional and the national party branch, yet T1 assumes that Finnmark Høyre had an even closer dialogue with the government.

Contact with state actors [non-party]

At the regional level, there was the expectation that, by engaging in a voluntary merger, Agder would at least not obtain worse conditions than before [AA1, VA1], but as of today, less money is sent to the new Agder region than it previously was to Vest-Agder and Aust-Agder combined [AA1]. In retrospective, VA1 thinks that they were quite naive at the regional level, expecting more state jobs and the state helping them by moving jobs to outskirts such as Lyngdal or Iveland. The idea was that the state wanted the merger so much that, merging voluntarily, Agder would obtain some benefits for that – “*når vi er så greie å slå sammen, så klart at vi tjene på det*” [VA1].

Given cross-party dissatisfaction with the expected new redistribution scheme, Monica Mæland who took over Jan Tore Sanner’s position in 2018 was in Agder two times. AA1 describes that in preparing the regional reform, the government or minister level had the largest impact, whereas the *Storting* played a somewhat less central role in the process.

The (re)location of the *fylkesmann*, NAV and *Statens Veivesen* could formally not be decided upon at the regional level. These were processes partly independent from *regionreformen* and the *forhandlingsutvalget* was in Oslo for discussing these issues. The department decided early that the *fylkesmann* should be merged and that its main office should be located in Arendal. This was considered as a signal; some national units of the *fylkesmann* were further moved to Arendal to show the national level’s positive standing on the matter of moving state jobs to Arendal [AA2]. This action is also mentioned by VA2 who states that by moving its offices to Arendal, the *fylkesmann* balanced the new agreement, thus clearly being a relevant actor.

The *forhandlingsutvalget* had several meetings with other departments, too, such as with the department of labour in terms of NAV and with the department with justice regarding the steering level of the new prisons. Every time they would come with their agreement, the ministers would state that they were already known with it – «*jaja, vi kjenner til den avtalen fra Agder*» [AA2].

In Agder, KS, the Norwegian organisation for local and regional governments, constituted a further actor, inviting to several conferences around the merger; KS had merged into KS Agder earlier than the *fylkeskommuner* themselves [VA2].

In Troms and Finnmark, there apparently has been much less connection between the merger of the *fylkesmannsembetene* and the merger of the regions. According to F1, the *fylkesmann* never got involved in the process. This can be explained by the fact that, based on the delays in the merger discussions between the regions, the *fylkesmann* completed the merger much earlier. The interviewees report of perceived challenges in the merger process of the *fylkesmann* – yet

following a different chain of authority and not having the political role regional politicians hold, this process cannot be compared to the regional merger [F1, T1, T2].

In terms of ulterior contact with the national level, T2 reports that whenever the regional leaders, Willy Ørnebakk and Ragnhild Vassvik, met the national minister, they clearly communicated that if the process was to succeed, they would need financial support to enhance regionalisation and to compensate for the increased distances. However, regarding the actual distribution of tasks, it eventually had to be the national government to decide, with the regional level not being further involved in the discussions [T2].

Contact to the municipal level

With regard to the local level, that is the municipalities, in Agder, one has to differentiate between the two largest towns and all smaller municipalities.

At an early stage, there had been some direct contact between Arendal and Kristiansand; yet, once the *fylkestingsvedtak* was taken and the *fellesnemnda* was installed, the towns did not play any specific role anymore [AA1]. According to VA1, it was *not* the *ordførere* of Kristiansand and Arendal that pushed the process. The constellation of Høyre steering in Kristiansand and Arendal being led by Arbeiderpartiet is not assumed to have been a decisive factor either [VA1]. VA2 yet states that the municipality of Kristiansand was another driver propagating a “*dette må dere få til*” logic; at that time, they had an *ordfører* from Høyre who now leads Agder Høyre. However, the local branch of Arendal Høyre seems to have been particularly sceptical about a merger, so AA2 had a lot of contact to them.

As regional politicians, VA2 states they were concerned with having the whole former Vest-Agder stand together on the merger, the municipalities being part of the decision. This is why regular conferences and meetings with the municipalities during that period focused on the merger.

AA2 stresses that taking Agder as a unity, there actually was a large majority of municipalities in favour of a merger – just Aust-Agder was split and the westernmost parts of Vest-Agder were sceptical [AA2].

In the case of Finnmark, when being asked about the role of specific municipalities, F1 points to Alta that, being the most populous municipality, had traditionally been in a form of tension with the *fylkeskommune* in Vadsø. Actually, having a large *videregående skole*, Alta had more regional administrative employees than Vadsø. Based on these tensions, Alta had issued some insecurity to which region they wanted to belong. Yet, according to F1, Alta did *not* play a larger role in the merger.

F2 describes Vadsø as the main location of resistance and assumes that there was much less engagement around the merger in other provinces of Eastern Finnmark such as Tana or Karasjok. This can be explained by the important role the regional administration held for Vadsø, especially in terms of workplaces. Yet, Vadsø did not have a *formalised* role in the regional merger process.

T1 and T2, too, note that Vadsø took on an important role in the process, becoming a more active actor than did Tromsø. In that context, T1 mentions that the then *ordfører* in Vadsø was highly engaged in the debate. T2 explains the differences by that Tromsø was well aware of that the administration would at least partly remain in Tromsø. Given the size and the job market of Tromsø, the town would also be more capable of compensating for a loss of jobs at the regional level than Vadsø. *“Litt flåsete sagt – om du mister 600 arbeidsplasser på fylkeshuset som går til Finnmark, så hadde Tromsø ikke gått under av den grunn, mens derimot mister du 600 i Vadsø, så er det en katastrofe.”*

Regional administration

In Agder, the interview objects state that there had been a lot of contact with the administration and that the administration played a central role in preparing the merger [AA1, AA2, VA1].

AA1 points out that the administration in East and West did not always share the same position and, as representatives of Aust-Agder, it was important for them to obtain the administration's insights. The constellation was special insofar that in Aust-Agder, the three administrative top leaders had decided not to join the new administration, so they were a bit freer to give “their” politicians good arguments on where which services should be located – AA1 states that *“de hjalp oss ganske mye i administrasjonen med å få fram de poengene vi trengte for å få flertall for de sakene vi hadde trengt”*. Contrarily, in the West, it was clear that the top leader Tine Sundtoft should join the new administration, she also became the project leader for the merger process and the then new *fylkeskommunedirektør*. She thus had to be more neutral [AA1].

It was also Tine Sundtoft and her staff that were central to the discussion where units would be located – they were pretty clear about which positions *had to* be located at Kristiansand, whereas other positions such as the *dokumentsender* were free to be located elsewhere [AA1].

VA1 also states that the administration was important in terms of how things should be organised, where meetings should take place, which topics were on the agenda – *“alt var på en måte linet opp ifra administrasjonen”*. According to VA1, the administration's crucial role in preparing the merger sometimes made it difficult for politicians to establish an opinion and difficult to estimate which would be the next steps in the process. *«Det er veldig fort gjort at få lagt noen stabbesteiner hvis noen ønsker å få det gjort på sin måte»*.

In the case of Finnmark, F2 confirms that there had been contact with the administration via the functions of union representatives, so-called *tillitsvalgte*. Apparently, there had been opposition against the merger, but once the decision was taken, the unions were concerned with finding good solutions for their members. Still, feedback from the *tillitsvalgte* would have shown that there was some level of dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction in the administration can partly be traced back to the fact that the differences in salary between Troms and Finnmark were not balanced, an issue which is also brought up by F1 and T2. The salary level is thus still higher in Troms than it is in Finnmark. As of today, an employee in Vadsø might fulfil the same job as his colleagues in Vadsø, but be paid 50.000 to 100.000 NOK less [F1]. This imparity should have been counterbalanced, but there had been no majority in the *fellesnemnda* for it [F1].

Business actors

In Agder, the business world apparently had a very positive stance towards a merger [AA2, VA1, VA2] and actively spoke out in favour of it; NHO had itself already merged into NHO Agder at an earlier stage. Høyre's representatives describe the business world as a driver, very interested in getting the merger through – “*dette må dere fa til*” [VA2]. NHO was probably the part of the business world Høyre was the closest connected to [VA2].

Both T1 and T2 list NHO as an actor positive towards the merger of Troms and Finnmark. NHO merged into NHO Arktis even before the merger of the *fylkeskommuner* went into force. This was based on the organisations part of NHO wanting to merge. Yet, according to T1, NHO was not involved in the regional reform itself.

Trade unions

Another actor present during the merger discussions were trade unions. In Agder, Arbeiderpartiet had regular contact to the employee's organisations, both LO – that is also represented at the party's steering level – and non-LO [AA1]. AA1 states that both *Undervisningsforbundet* and *Fagforbundet* had no intention to merge and preferred to keep Aust-Agder. Those organisations are important players in that the largest group of regional employees is employed at schools, in addition to at the administration itself. Within the administration, too, it was many that wanted to stay at the location they were working at. So, as long as there was the realistic change for reversing or stopping the merger, there was resistance – whereas once the decision was taken, LO and *Fagforbundet* contributed more constructively to the process and came with good contributions [AA1].

VA1 describes the role of trade unions as quite important in trying to secure the jobs some representatives in the outskirts were afraid would be drawn to the centre – «*hvis de klarte å sette noe på dagsorden, så var det lettere å fått gjort noe i forhold til de avgjørelsene som skulle tas*» [VA1].

T2, LO-tillitsvalgt in Troms, confirms that in Troms and Finnmark, too, the trade unions representing the regional administrative employees were involved in the process. *Fagforbundet* in particular would have shown considerable opposition to the merger, having reached a delay in their respective merger. Basically, having an agreement on following the administrative structure, *Fagforbundet* would have had to follow the new regional structure – with Troms and Finnmark expected to reverse the merger by 2024, they now seem able to follow the old regional structure to be re-established. This agreement constitutes an instance of contact between three actors – the regional politicians, the regional administration and *Fagforbundet*. According to T2, *Fagforbundet* also worked more directly politically against the merger. The union would have gotten in touch with all political parties, sending out statements to the *fylkesting* in matters of job guarantees and stating that they were opposed to a merger. “*Du har to måter å gjøre ting på – det ene er å politisk å prøve å påvirke, det andre er selvfølgelig det som ligger formalisert i hovedtariffavtale og hovedavtale og de spillereglene ble jo fulgt*”. Regarding the political way of influence, Arbeiderpartiet eventually came with a job guarantee as proposed by the trade unions to which the opposition parties issued criticism. In the aftermath of the merger, within the trade unions, there still had been some dissatisfaction with the result in matters of localisation and the fact that differences in salary between Troms and Finnmark were not adjusted for.

Role of local media

When asked about the role of local media, the respondents primarily gave an account of the standpoints the respective media supported. This is of interest in terms of coinciding positions between political and media actors; it therefore is about alignment and potential alliances.

Fædrelandsvennen (FVN), nrk Sørlandet and, to a certain extent, Agderposten can be characterised as the dominating media in Agder during the merger process [AA1, AA2]; they were „*toneangivende*” [AA1]. Nrks coverage can be described as informative, whereas according to AA1, FVN was a bit more sensationally oriented.

Being the largest newspaper in total, yet centred around Kristiansand and Setesdalen, FVN issued many comments and articles in favour of the merger [AA2]. In the East, the regional newspaper reported both sides, yet taking on a more sceptical stance [AA2]. Agderposten would

traditionally take on a monitoring role, meaning that each time Kristiansand got a little more than Arendal, “*en lillefinger mer*”, it would be big news, whereas otherwise, Agderposten would not write much on the merger [AA1]. AA1 also regards Avisen Agder in the westernmost part of Vest-Agder as well as the newspapers in the East of Aust-Agder as media merely centred around their own municipalities, such as about the future of their schools.

When asked about the role of local media, F1 states that the medias’ task was to convey information and political standpoints in the *fylkesting*. According to F1, the media mainly followed up on that task. Still, Skjalg Fjellheim, the political editor of the Troms-based Nordlys during the process was, in Finnmark, perceived as a distinct campaigner of the merger and Troms’ standpoint. F1 admits that this perception might in hindsight be not perfectly appropriate. Also, F1 notes that Nordlys *did* adapt to changes in the political standpoints afterwards. On the other hand, the media in Finnmark were more Finnmark-oriented, especially so the Vadsø-based Finnmarken [F1].

T1 confirms that Nordlys generally took the standpoint that merging was a good idea, setting the tone in the discussion from initial stages on. T2 also points out the regional differences in media coverage, the media in Finnmark stressing that the fact that the merger had been enforced by the national level and supporting Finnmark’s politicians, the media in Troms taking a more pragmatic position. Based on that, the medias’ role as conveying opinions was very much in line with the standpoints of citizens in both *fylker*. In congruence with AA1 in the case of Agder, T2 criticises that the media did not show further interest in the issue, apart from instances of open conflict. F2 on the other hand underlines the high level of media attention the merger process attracted.

Further actors

F2 mentions that whereas most actors in Finnmark were against a merger, some Sami interests did not have a strong opinion on the issue, given that they were already using both former *fylkeskommuner* for reindeer herding.

More generally, F2 stresses that “everyone” was involved in the merger discussions in Finnmark, including administrative staff, *tillitsansatte*, civilians, former politicians and (trade) unions.

T2 notes that at the *fellesnemnda* leadership level, there had been talks with Trøndelag that served to obtain insights on how they had conducted the merger. This should open up for learning – yet, several characteristics differed significantly for Troms and Finnmark, so not all of the lessons learned could de facto be applied.

In conclusion, cooperation between the different parties in the former *fylkesting* has largely been assessed positive for all regions. In terms of intra-party politics, *internal* disagreements were an issue for Arbeiderpartiet in Aust-Agder where, as well as in Finnmark, the party's mode of consensus finding has been brought up by the interview objects. Contact between the two regional branches of each party has, again, been more conflictive for Arbeiderpartiet than it was for Høyre; the latter largely followed the national political line in favour of a merger. Discussions were particularly heated between Troms and Finnmark Arbeiderparti.

For Høyre, contact to the national party implied contact to the government, in particular the ministry for local government, that apparently was quite disponible in both Agder and Troms and Finnmark. In the case of Arbeiderpartiet, contact to the national level played a more important role in Troms and Finnmark, with the national party branch taking on somewhat of a mediating role.

Non-party national actors of relevance during the process were the *kommunalminister*, Sanner and, in the following, Mæland; admittedly, at the same time, they were part of the national party branch for Høyre. In Agder, the *forhandlingsutvalget* was involved in discussions with several departments. With a regard to the merger of the *fylkesmann*'s offices, this process became more connected to the regional merger in Agder than it did in Troms and Finnmark.

In terms of municipalities, in Agder, Høyre-led Kristiansand *might* be regarded as a driving force; generally, the two largest towns did *not* have any formal role in the merger. In Troms and Finnmark, Vadsø has been described as the main location of resistance against the merger, thus aligning with its *fylkeskommune*.

The administration played a crucial role in the preparation of the merger in both cases. In Agder, Aust-Agder's administration apparently supported their regional politicians, delivering arguments about the future location of services. In Troms and Finnmark, dissatisfaction in the administration has been noted with a view to the continuing salary differences; it has also been suggested that Troms' administrative leader took on a particularly active role during the merger [see V.VIII].

The business world had a positive standing towards the merger in Agder; this applies to NHO in both merger cases. The trade unions took a more negative stance towards merging, aligning with parts of Arbeiderpartiet on general and more specific, such as supporting the maintenance of workplaces in the districts, standpoints.

Local media were primarily reporting standpoints in line with their respective population's majority opinion.

V.VIII. Entrepreneurs

Vest-Agder's *fylkesordfører* Terje Damman (H) is, by all interview objects in Agder, mentioned as a central actor in the process. "*Fylkesordføreren var klart den ledende politikeren som holdt retningen helen veien*" [VA2]. The process was to a large extent driven by leading politicians. Høyre and Venstre can be characterised as the parties that were the most engaged in getting the merger through, with Venstre being the first party to merge their regional party branches [AA1]. In Vest-Agder, too, the then opposition leader Randi Øverland played a crucial role [VA1, VA2]; according to VA1, before the installing of the fellesnemnda, it was Randi Øverland and Terje Damman that were the dominating actors in Vest-Agder in the merger discussion. In Aust-Agder, Arbeiderpartiet's leader and *fylkesordfører* accordingly held an important position in the merger process [VA1].

As mentioned before, several non-party political actors were mentioned as important actors during the process, too, such as the administration [VA1], trade unions [VA1] and *Arendalsmiljøet* [AA2].

In the case of Troms and Finnmark, Troms' *fylkesrådsleder* Willy Ørnebakk (Ap) is mentioned as a dominating actor by several interviewees [F1, T1, T2]. T1 also lists the party leader Cecilie Myrseth who had been Troms' *fylkesrådsleder* before Ørnebakk took over. Finnmark's *fylkesordfører* Ragnhild Vassvik can be seen as another central actor in the process [F2, T2]. T2 describes Vassvik's standpoint as categoric resistance – "*dette vil vi ikke, vi vil ikke, vi vil ikke*", whereas Willy Ørnebakk would have applied a more pragmatic approach to the process, trying to achieve the best results once the merger had eventually been decided on. As mentioned earlier, there was some criticism in Troms on Ørnebakk's *modus operandi*; externally, he was perceived as working more in favour of the merger than his mandate might have provided him for [T2].

F2 stresses that in Eastern Finnmark, not only Ragnhild Vassvik, but Arbeiderpartiet's representatives in general – that mostly were against the merger – played a crucial role in the process. This group would include Helga Pedersen, representing Finnmark Arbeiderparti in the *Storting* between 2009 and 2017, as well as Vadsø's *ordfører* since 2019, Wenche Pedersen. T1 also notes that the *ordfører* of Vadsø was very engaged in the debate.

Arbeiderpartiet's regional party leader Kristina Hansen is noted as a relevant actor in terms of contact to the national party level [F1].

F2 calls Venstre's Trine Noodt (V) the actor most actively promoting the merger in Finnmark. F2 also lists Vadsø's 2015-2019 Høyre-ordfører Hans-Jacob Bønå as an actor in an exposed position as he had to stand in for the national government's decisions.

F1 criticises that Troms' *fylkesrådmann*, Stein Ovesen, would have taken a role exceeding his designated role as an *administrative* leader.

For the time after the establishing of the *fellesnemnda*, its respective leaders by default became central figures in the process [T2].

Summing up, in both cases, it primarily was leading regional politicians, i.e., *fylkesordfører* or *fylkesrådmann* and the party leaders that took on a central role during the merger process, supplemented by different party-political representatives at the regional and, in the instance of Vadsø, local level, as well as, to some extent, administrative leaders.

V.IX. Period after establishing the *fellesnemnda*

In Agder, a question on differences in the discussions before and after the decision in favour of the merger at the *fylkesting* in December 2016 has been included in order to control for that the focus on the process before the *fylkestingsvedtak* is reasonable. This was based on the impression that once the decision to merger was taken at the regional level, the process was less conflictive and merely centred around negotiations the *details* of the merger and the new regional structure.

It nonetheless has to be noted that in the case of Troms and Finnmark, but partly also by some actors in Agder, the distinction between before and after the *fellesnemnda*, is not always kept up. This implies that some of the insights in previous subchapters actually apply to the *fellesnemnda* period, too. Although not initially foreseen, this appeared reasonable as there still was a considerable level of resistance present in Finnmark after establishing the *fellesnemnda*.

This assumption of a less conflictive process after the *fylkestingsvedtak* in Agder is supported by AA2 who also mentions that Arbeiderpartiet's *ordfører* in Aust-Agder had earlier been in favour of a merger, having a lot of experience in working together with Vest-Agder and many other in Arbeiderpartiet's group were positive towards a merger, too. Based on that, once the decision was taken, there was no more resistance within Arbeiderpartiet. AA2 thus did not experience any resistance in the *fylkesting* after the decision – although of course there were political discussions within the *fellesnemnda* and even if everyone followed and accepted the decision, there still were geographical fights. The positive climate of cooperation is also

stressed by AA2's assumptions that an option to split the region would not obtain much votes in the new *fylkesting* and by that no one is talking about enlargement any longer.

This is also confirmed by VA1 stating that once they had taken the decision, that was the way they should pursue; although at the same time, they were still working for getting through their position as representatives of Vest-Agder.

When conducting the interviews in Troms and Finnmark, several respondents did refer quite detailed to the time period *after* establishing the *fellesnemnda* given that this period, too, has been characterised by pronounced conflict. It is generally agreed that in the *fellesnemnda*, the actors were more involved in conducting the process, trying to reach favourable solutions [F1, T1, T2].

When the *fellesnemnda* was established, its leader Kari-Anni Opsal from Troms Arbeiderpartiet did recall that many representatives in Troms did not want the merger either. Deputy leader Ulf Ballo described the upcoming process the following way. "*Veien er fortsatt humpete. Nå starter arbeidet med å slette den ut. Så må den gruses og deretter asfalteres. Det er en lang og tidkrevende jobb*". In spite of being a merger opponent, Ballo at that point wanted to try to find good solutions in cooperation with Troms. "*Jeg håper nå at vi finner gode løsninger sammen med Troms. Selv om det er motvillig, gjør vi et helhjertet forsøk*" (Barth-Heyerdahl 2018). This statement stands in contrast with T1's proposal that some representatives from Finnmark over all the time worked against the merger.

Even after establishing the *fellesnemnda*, conflicts played out especially within the two regional branches of Arbeiderpartiet [F1, T2]. F1 does not consider the process after establishing the *fellesnemnda* a good process.

Within Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet, some questions had to be taken up to the steering level – which on some matters was divided with three representatives supporting one and three representatives supporting the alternative solution [F1].

According to F2, politics in Troms and Finnmark have throughout the whole process, including the time after establishing the *fellesnemnda*, been strongly shaped by the claim of a future reversal, given that this was part of the manifesto of the political left-wing majority. Resistance has thus consistently been at a high level – according to F2, this is mainly because both Arbeiderpartiet and Senterpartiet had won the elections advocating for the reversal. Høyre Finnmark *did* see a room of opportunity provided by the merger; yet, given that the large political majority still was against merging, even in the two years after the merger entering into

force, there still are several issues left unresolved. Working on a future reversal did stop up the process, preserving a status quo [F2]^{xi}.

When asked about the work in the *fellesnemnda*, T1 first stresses that, with the *fellesnemnda*'s first meeting taking place in December 2018, there was a very short time frame left until the merger's entering into force. The following process was slow, although not without any result, and there still was considerable resistance. T1 also explains that from a Troms perspective, working in a *fylkesting* with representatives that *did not* want to work together for a common region, has been challenging and much has *not* been achieved.

In line with other representatives, T2 described the negotiations in the *fellesnemnda* as challenging, given that for example the school model highly differed between the two regions. T2 mentions that Troms and Finnmark did learn from each other, such as in terms of the regionalisation of schools as practiced in Troms which might be adopted by Finnmark. T2 also speculates that Finnmark will keep the parliamentary model of regional leadership as it devotes larger political power to the majority. "*Hvis fylkesrådet sier vi skal bygge en vei der, så blir det bygd en vei der – den påvirkningen hadde de ikke i Finnmark*" [T2].

Comparing these findings, it can be held that in Agder, the process became significantly less conflictive once the formal decision in favour of merging was taken. In Troms and Finnmark instead, there still was a considerable level of conflict even after the *fellesnemnda* had been established. Here, conflicts played out between the two regional branches of Arbeiderpartiet that held the majority in the committee. The claim for a future reversal highly impacted the working towards the merger in 2020.

V.X. Impact from previous merger attempt

In order to have a better understanding the frame of reference the merger discussion was embedded in, in Agder, a question about differences between the successful merger of 2020 and the earlier merger attempt in 2011 was included. The respondents stated that they simply were not ready for a merger at that stage; it was too early [AA1, VA2]. Scepticism was larger in Aust-Agder at that time; there, about two thirds of Arbeiderpartiet would have been against a merger, with Senterpartiet and SV following Arbeiderpartiet on the issue, FrP was also strictly against it and neither the administration was in favour of it – "*da var vi rett og slett ikke modne,*

^{xi} At this point, it seems inevitable to note empirical findings for the period since 2020, that is *after* the merger entering into force, although this was not provided for in the intentional time frame. Yet, the following empirical findings confirm that in Troms and Finnmark, there has over all the time, been constant resistance after the merger – both after establishing the *fellesnemnda* and after establishing the new region.

vi trodde ikke helt på den” [AA1]. In Aust-Agder, there had also been more citizen engagement that time, whereas in the later attempt, it was a more laid-back process [AA2].

VA2 describes the differences between the merger attempts as mainly a matter of times – “*tid modnes, prosesser modnes, tankeganger modnes*”; therefore, the *fylkeskommuner* did at a certain point realise they were too small for large challenges of the future.

VI. Analysis

This chapter connects the empirical findings [V.] to the analytical framework [II.] and draws comparisons between the two cases. Based on the process description and assessment subchapter [V.IV], challenges the actors encountered can be seen as hinting at cleavages present, whereas the handling of such can give an idea about the strategies applied. Information from the cooperation chapter [V.VII] is primarily applied for detecting alliances between different actors.

Within this chapter, first, arguments and cleavages are presented. These will be made use of in order to explain what regional actors build their strategies [VI.III] on.

The analytical framework [Figure 1] guiding the analysis is centred around strategies applied by regional political actors aiming at impacting the merger process. Strategic action occurs within the window opened by a reform option, constrained and facilitated by the use of cleavages by entrepreneurs. Arguments employed by the entrepreneurs are based on underlying cleavages. The framework builds on the following five strategies, assuming their effect to be constrained by structural factors.

- i. *Coalition building* is about gaining support outside the own political grouping or parties, such as by benefiting from cleavages in the opposition.
- ii. *Compromising* solutions that contain parts of two different policies.
- iii. *Compensation* is about accounting for perceived losses of opponents by the linkage of different issues – implying that a new component is added – or by scaling back the size of the reform.
- iv. *Non-resolving conflicts* refers to solutions that only address short-term problems in a pragmatic way.
- v. *Confusion* strategies might be applied in delivering only partial information on the expected reform output.
- vi. *Extension of conflicts* becomes possible by the inclusion of new actors or new elements into the discourse.

Compromising and *compensation*, but also *non-resolving conflicts*, can also be applied within an overarching strategy of *coalition building*. *Non-resolving conflicts* and *confusion* are assumed to be more difficult to identify for outsiders. In order to establish strategies, the capability of policy entrepreneurs, i.e., dominant actors within the reform process, is required.

As noted in the empirical findings [V.], at the beginning of the interviews, the respondents were asked to give a short description of the merger process. Some interviewees came with a more descriptive account of the process [AA1, AA2, VA2] others issued their personal opinion or an evaluation. This can be considered a finding in itself as highlighting difficulties first [F2, T1, T2,] hints at the interviewees perceiving the process as problematic. A different approach is chosen by F1, who, instead of referring to the merger process, first introduced its background, explaining the ways in which Finnmark is different from the rest of Norway.

VI.I. Arguments

Several arguments brought up by the interviewees can be connected to the issues discussed in the literature on local government reforms. According to Baldersheim and Rose (2010), in the context of a reform, framing includes two major components of arguments, that is a reasoning for which a specific change is needed and evidence supporting this claim.

Economies of scale as opposed to distance of citizens to public services

The discussion about the adequate size of subnational units is centred about two opposing arguments – economies of scale which can be obtained by larger units (Leland and Thumaier 2016) versus the increasing distance of public services and offices to the citizens, hampering political participation (Blesse and Rösel 2017).

In Agder, Høyre's representatives [AA2, VA2] recall the opportunities of economies of scale as a reason for merging into a larger unit. Another point made is the larger voice a merged region would obtain at the national level [VA1]; this argument is also brought up in Troms [T1]. In Troms and Finnmark, the potential of a larger region that would be better equipped to deliver on regional tasks is introduced as an argument in favour of merging by T1 and F2. T2 agrees on the premise that regionalisation *could* have lifted up the new region; yet, the resources required were not given to Troms and Finnmark in the context of the merger process.

Put differently, the argument of economies of scale was less successfully applied in Troms and Finnmark than in Agder.

F1 highlights the distance to the new regional centre of gravity. Distance to the new regional parliament is also noted by F2 and in Agder by the representatives of Aust-Agder [AA1] and the West of Vest-Agder [VA1]. The argument is thus prominent under representatives of the smaller regions, Aust-Agder and Finnmark, or “outskirts”, the westernmost parts of Vest-Agder.

F1’s argument that Finnmark could better arrange for the decrease in population in some regions reflects the argument that smaller units are better equipped to handle demographic challenges (Blesse and Rösel 2017).

In terms of size, when compared, the public choice line of argumentation was prominent in the case of Finnmark, whereas in Agder, prospected economies of scale were an argument accepted by many, not only the foremost reform supporters.

Identity

Jacobsen points out the role local identity played during the local and regional government reform, with some reform opponents regarding the mergers as an attack on the municipality and local identity (Dag Ingvar Jacobsen 2020, p. 55). This can be confirmed for the case of Finnmark. Although not considered in the questionnaire, the role of Finnmark’s distinct identity is brought up by respondents in both Troms and Finnmark. It has been noted that the identity within Finnmark was nuanced although one can assume that once experiencing an external threat, Finnmark’s people would gather around their common identity as *finnmarkinger*. It has traditionally been suggested that when national interests experience a threat by an international crisis, a ‘rally around the flag’ effect among both politicians and the public occurs [see, e.g., Costello 2021]. The case of Finnmark *could* be seen as an instance of a rally at different levels, with the interests in question located at the subnational level experiencing a threat by the national level. In spite of the gathering around Finnmark’s identity, support for the executive – that eventually had to engage in the merger by participating in talks with Troms – did not increase on a long-term perspective; consensus among the political elite was neither present consistently over the reform period.

In Agder, too, identity is a topic touched upon, with AA2 noting that a shared identity of belonging to Agder had been at place even before the merger. This can, amongst other, be understood in the historical context of Agder having been a unit before.

Comparing these findings, it becomes clear that identity was more shared in Agder, hereby facilitating the merger, whereas it was opposing in Troms and Finnmark. The topic also became a significantly more important part of the discussions and the public discourse in Troms and Finnmark, being successfully applied by Finnmark's reform opponents.

VI.II. Cleavages

For actors to engage in strategic action such as coalition building, they need to be aware of the cleavages present. Making use of correct assumptions about cleavages enables actors to build alliances. Baldersheim and Rose (2010) suggest that in instances of weaker local government, conflicts tend to be centred around the centre-periphery cleavage, indicated by struggles between local and national government. In cases of strong local government, conflicts would follow a left-right pattern. The authors yet also found that in the Norwegian reform context, the centre-periphery cleavage has traditionally been highly relevant.

In the case of Agder, the geographical cleavage can be divided into a centre-periphery and an East-West cleavage. This differentiation contains the finding that in Agder, the centre-periphery cleavage is not exclusively based on an East-West dimension between the two regions. Based on the interviews, a centre-periphery cleavage between the coastal areas around Arendal and Kristiansand and the more rural outskirts stands out for both the old as well as the new Agder *fylker*. This centre-periphery dimension could be interpreted as a cross-cutting cleavage – outskirts in both the westernmost parts of Vest-Agder and in Aust-Agder shared a fear of losing power to the centre; this potential room for alliance has however apparently not been made activated.

A centre-periphery cleavage is also present in the case of Troms and Finnmark. Representatives of Finnmark feared that a merger could pull resources out of the region [F1]. According to F1, a larger region with the political centre of power located in Troms would make it difficult to take care of Finnmark's interests. F2, too, mentions that the issue of districts losing as opposed to centres played a role during the process.

Another dimension in Finnmark is based on internal differences between East and West with Vest-Finnmark being, at least slightly, more positive towards a merger. This has also been discussed by Laila Davidsen, Alta Høyre, making clear that "*mange av innbyggerne i Vest-Finnmark har hatt et veldig perifert forhold til fylkesadministrasjonen i Vadsø*" (Solvang et al. 2018). Although these differences between Vest-Finnmark and Øst-Finnmark could have opened for an alliance between Vest-Finnmark and Troms such has not been noted by any of

the interview objects *and* in the 2018 referendum, Vest-Finnmark voted with a large majority against the merger^{xii}.

Representatives of both Aust-Agder and Finnmark issue the criticism that at a point during the negotiations, they were treated as the “*lillebror*” by their neighbouring *fylke*. Vest-Agder and Troms on the other hand can be regarded as the centre of the new regions. The *interregional* East-West dimension can therefore be labelled as a variant of the centre-periphery cleavage. Generally, the interview material confirms the predominance of the centre-periphery cleavage in reform processes in Norway.

VI.III. Strategies

This thesis focuses on the strategies applied by regional politicians in the context of the merger process. Predominant actors during the respective merger processes have, according to the respondents, been representatives in the most exposed positions, that is the *fylkesordfører* / *fylkesrådmann*, *gruppeleder* and *partileder*. These can be considered as entrepreneurs in the process, acting in more or less close cooperation with their regional party colleagues.

Compensation and compromise

As noted in the theory chapter [II.II], *compensation* and *compromising* strategies have similarities and can be expected to follow comparable goals. They are therefore at this point discussed within the same subchapter.

Compensation strategies can be detected during the merger negotiations in Agder. This has especially been prominent regarding the distribution of jobs. The agreement to base the regional administration in Kristiansand was made possible by conceding the *fylkesmann*, NAV and *Statens Veivesen* to Arendal. This means of *compensation* was further strengthened by the *sikringsbestemmelse*, listing 120 jobs that could be transferred to Arendal in case the city did not obtain as many national jobs as estimated.

In order to minimise the loss of skilled personnel and dissatisfaction within the administration, *compensation* instruments were also designated for administrative staff commuting between Arendal and Kristiansand.

^{xii} Given that no interview was conducted with political representatives of Vest-Finnmark, their position could constitute an area of further research, particularly in light of Alta’s interest of joining Troms after the prospected reversal of the Troms and Finnmark merger became public in autumn 2021.

Instances of *compromising* and *compensation* can be detected in the case of Troms and Finnmark, too. The administrative division in the new Troms and Finnmark, dispersing leadership and authorities, constitutes a *compromise*.

The agreement that Finnmark would obtain the same number of representatives in the *fellesnemnda*, although the regulating law would have allowed for Troms to have more members, can be interpreted as a *compromising* strategy from Troms. In fact, this action of Troms not wanting to benefit from Finnmark's conflicts with the national level might even be labelled as an instance of *coalition building* between Troms and Finnmark – or at least as an attempt from Troms' representatives to please Finnmark.

When in January 2018, there still had been no decision on the merger and neither on the prospective administration structure, discussions referred to the Troms-model and the Finnmark-model, respectively. Both Troms and Finnmark were in favour of locating the administration in Harstad, Finnsnes, Tromsø and Vadsø. However, in Finnmark's model the main administration would have been shared, with the administrative leadership located in Vadsø and the political leadership in Tromsø. Troms instead came with a suggestion that would move both the political and the administrative leadership to Tromsø (Tønset 2018). Dividing leadership between Vadsø and Tromsø could be regarded as a *compromise* strategy envisaged by Finnmark. It might on the other hand be regarded as an unrealistic demand issued by Finnmark that already, in spite of the two processes not appearing particularly connected, had obtained the headquarters of the *fylkesmann*. Following the latter assumption, Finnmark's suggested model could also be seen as part of a *confusion* strategy, slowing down the merger process.

From a comparative point of view, it has to be noted that in Troms and Finnmark, there apparently has been significantly less connection between the merger of the *fylkesmannsembetene* and the merger of the regions. This can be explained by the time differences, with Agder agreeing on a merger at an earlier stage; it still appears obvious that in Agder, there were more active attempts to involve the *fylkesmann* in the discussion around the regional merger. It can accordingly be stated that merger proponents in Agder were more successful in integrating the merger of *fylkesmann* into the discussion, opening up for a *compensation* strategy in terms of workplaces. This strategy, further strengthened by the *sikringsbestemmelse*, has been a crucial component of Agder's reform success. While *compromises* were achieved in Troms and Finnmark, too, and those did facilitate the process,

the division of the leadership at the same time served the “opposite” goal, that is the possibility for a future reversal of the merger.

Coalitions and coalition building

In terms of *coalition building*, it is assumed that coalitions can be built by the active engagement of political entrepreneurs. Empirical findings on cooperation and contact with other actors [V.VII] therefore serve as a basis for identifying strategies of *coalition building*.

Coalitions between (party-) political actors

In the case of Aust-Agder, an instance of successful *coalition building* can be detected when Aust-Agder Høyre included a paragraph on further enlargement in their proposal for a merger in the *fylkesting* in December 2016, hereby obtaining three out of four votes from FrP, decisive for the merger passing the *fylkesting*. This implies that the *voluntary* merger of the Agder-*fylker* became possible thanks to the merger proponents’ successful *coalition building* in Aust-Agder. Regarding the *folkeavstemning* in 2018, in Finnmark, it was votes from Høyre and FrP, in addition to the left-wing parties, that had opened up for a referendum. This supports the finding that not all representatives of the conservative block actually were unambiguously fond of the merger.

An important step in the merger process of Troms and Finnmark was when Troms *fylkesrådsleder* Willy Ørnebakk decided not to conduct the merger as long as Finnmark did not want to be part of the negotiations. “*Min anbefaling til fylkestinget er at vi fra Troms sin side anser det som umulig for medlemmer fra Troms å gjennomføre sitt arbeid i fellesnemnda uten at Finnmark deltar i nemnda*” (Præsteng Thuen 2018). This position, as well as the agreement on Troms and Finnmark sending the same number of representatives to the *fellesnemnda*, can be regarded as a case of attempted *coalition building* between Troms and Finnmark from Troms Arbeiderpartiet’s side.

It should be remembered that even within the different parties in the same former region, opinions could differ. Especially in the case of Arbeiderpartiet, the mode of internal consensus finding has been highlighted by several respondents. This would comprehend negotiations behind closed doors to reach a common party line at the *fylkesting*. After agreeing on a common position, by majority voting in the last resort, the party representatives would vote together along the party line in the *fylkesting*. This procedure implies that Arbeiderpartiet can generally

be assumed to act as a unitary actor – a premise which in the case of Troms and Finnmark however has not always been maintained.

Agreements also first had to be obtained between the two different regional party branches, such as when preparing for meetings in the *fellesnemnda*. This, again, has been particularly important in the case of Arbeiderpartiet. In Troms and Finnmark, Arbeiderpartiet provided the majority of representatives to the committee, so once they internally reached an agreement, it was guaranteed to pass the *fellesnemnda* voting. This is why most discussions of the discussions went on internally in Arbeiderpartiet. In Agder, when the representatives from Arbeiderpartiet's two regional party branches would come to an agreement, they would often obtain the majority in the *fellesnemnda*.

Cooperation between the two different regional branches has been described as less conflictive in the case of Høyre for both the cases of Agder and Troms and Finnmark. Høyre's regional branches mainly followed their national party in engaging in favour of the merger.

Contact with the national party followed different mechanisms for Høyre as opposed to Arbeiderpartiet. Høyre's regional branches generally tried to contribute to the national government's objective of conducting a merger; contact channels were thus made use of in order to facilitate the merger. Given that the government or ministry level was central to the decisions on the merger's modalities, Høyre's national representatives did *by default* play a more important role during the process than did Arbeiderpartiet's and Høyre's regional politicians enjoyed privileged access to these national decision makers.

In the case of Troms and Finnmark Arbeiderparti, the national party apparently was involved in form of a mediating role. On the other hand, Arbeiderpartiet's national policy has to a larger degree been influenced by the regional level, with national standpoints being based on regional interests, Arbeiderpartiet eventually going in for a reversal of enforced mergers in the run to the 2021 *Storting* elections. In this context, *Stortingsrepresentant* Helga Pedersen was an actor significantly contributing to the establishment of national standpoints that took into account Finnmark's position, arguing for a non-conduction of *tvangssammenslåinger* already in the forefront of the 2017 national election (Ruud 2017).

It has been mentioned earlier that in Agder, outskirts in both the Western parts of Vest-Agder and in Aust-Agder were afraid of losing power to the centre. This cleavage might have been made use of in terms of *coalition building* of these municipalities in order to counter the

powerful centre. An alliance of this kind has however *not* been mentioned by any of the interviews.

None of the municipalities in Agder has been said to have played a particularly active role in the merger process, although discussions were centred around the future of Arendal and Kristiansand.

In the case of Troms and Finnmark instead, Vadsø *can* be characterised as an actor given that resistance against the merger was centred around the municipality, involving both administrative staff the political municipal level. Vadsø's position accordingly aligned with the political majority against the merger present in Finnmark *fylkeskommune*.

Coalitions with actors outside the party-political sphere

Bureaucracies can form and constrain reform process (Jacobsen 2005, Myksvoll et al. 2021).

As pointed out by AA1, there apparently had been a form of alliance between the resigning administrative leadership and the political level in Aust-Agder, supporting the regional politicians in arguing for their cause. This coalition admittedly worked *on the terms of* the merger rather than preventing a merger itself.

In the case of Troms and Finnmark, F1 accuses Troms' administrative leader to have taken on more of a political role in engaging for the merger.

Concerning the future of employees, the administration was involved in the merger process in all former fylker [AA1, AA2, VA1, F1, F2, T2].

VA1 mentions an information disadvantage of regional politicians as opposed to the administration. The administration's crucial role and its information advantage in preparing the merger would call for further work on how the administration as an actor in itself influenced the merger process, also including interviews with administrative representatives.

The bureaucracy can generally be confirmed as an important actor during the merger processes in all former *fylker*; it yet did not take on a decisive role in terms of whether the merger should take place in the first instance.

It has been noted that both in Agder and in Troms and Finnmark the business association NHO had a positive stance on the merger. In Agder, NHO had merged its regional branches already at an earlier stage and NHO Agder is described as a driving force in favour of the merger of the two *fylkeskommuner*. In the case of Agder, one can thus talk of an alliance between Høyre and NHO representing the business world as merger proponents. Yet, the direction of *coalition building* seems difficult to establish. It evidently was in NHO's interest to support Høyre in

getting the merger through, instead of the party having to convince NHO. This open engagement of NHO constitutes a facilitating factor to the merger success in Agder.

Although NHO also was in favour of the merger in the North and had merged into NHO Arktis in the forefront of the regional merger, the association has apparently been less of an active actor engaging in favour of the merger of the *fylkeskommuner* in Troms and Finnmark.

In both Agder and Troms and Finnmark, the employees' organisations were in close contact with Arbeiderpartiet and in both Agder and Troms and Finnmark, *Fagforbundet* and other employees' organisations were, at least at the beginning of the discussions, *against* the merger. In Vest-Agder, according to VA1, the trade unions played quite an important role in securing jobs in the outskirts. This hints at a coalition between Arbeiderpartiet's merger-sceptics and the employees' organisations.

Fagforbundet is said to have worked actively and politically against the merger in Troms and Finnmark [T2]. This is confirmed by a Nordlys article in which it is stated that leaders in *Fagforbundet* Troms and Finnmark were satisfied with Troms' Arbeiderparti wanting to block the national government's plan to enforce a merger without Finnmark's participation. At this point, the party's leader Cecilie Myrseth had made clear that Troms Arbeiderpartiet *did not* want to work on a political decision without Finnmark being part of it (Tapio and Rustad 2018). These findings allow for regarding *Fagforbundet* as part of the initial anti-merger coalition in Troms and Finnmark; again, it cannot be concretely established to what extent and how *alliance building* took place, given that it was Arbeiderpartiet that based its job guarantee on the trade unions' suggestion, so it apparently was the latter that in this case had taken the initiative.

As described in the empirical chapter, the regional media' standpoints were largely in line with the popular opinion in their respective location, with Nordlys in Troms and FVN in Kristiansand portraying the merger more positive and the local media in Aust-Agder and Finnmark, respectively, taking a more sceptical stance. Nordlys has apparently been the most predominant medium accompanying the merger process in Troms and Finnmark. While opinions of local media coincided with the population's majority standpoints, it did, based on the interviews, not become clear to which degree the media played an active role in the process. Hence, it could not be established whether alliances were present or actively build.

Non-resolving conflicts

According to Klausen et al. 2019, quasi-solutions are compromises that extend over some period of time; they can lessen the level of conflict, but imply low policy consistency. Strategies

of *non-resolving conflicts* can be found in both cases for the period after establishing the *fellesnemnda*.

In Agder, an instance of *non-resolving conflicts* can be seen with regard to the schools, for which no final common solution on how to preserve schools in the districts has been found.

The modus operandi after the establishment of the *fellesnemnda* in Troms and Finnmark can be labelled as a strategy of *non-resolving conflicts*. Certain fields, such as the school system were not harmonised within the new region and up to a certain point, two different administrations were maintained, i.e., administrative positions were spread over both former regions. This strategy can be explained with the political actors keeping in mind that a reversal of the merger was to expect with a change of government at the national level.

These findings imply that whereas a strategy of *non-resolving conflicts* facilitated the merger in Agder, in Troms and Finnmark it played a larger role as a means to keeping the option for a further reversal.

Confusion

The proposal to include Rogaland or Telemark in spite of these regions issuing comparatively low interest for a merger with Agder constitutes another instance of strategic action. The underlying idea was to move the centre of gravity in the other direction; that is, if including Telemark, the centre of gravity would have been moved eastwards, benefitting Arendal; including Rogaland would primarily have benefitted the westernmost parts of Vest-Agder, but it also would have moved the centre of gravity away from Kristiansand. The demands for talks with the two neighbouring regions thus represent an attempt to move the centre of gravity of the debate. They *could* additionally be seen as a form of *confusion* strategy given that a merger of Agder did not appear of interest to the political majority in Rogaland or Telemark.

During the merger process, Finnmark came with several requests, such as the region being called for Finnmark and the regional capital and the common administration being located to Vadsø, even though the *fylkesmann*'s office had already been moved to Vadsø. Issuing demands unlikely to be fulfilled *could*^{xiii} have been part of a *confusion* strategy applied by Finnmark's representatives in order to hamper the merger process; the same holds true for the claims of further including Rogaland and Telemark to the process in Agder.

Extension of conflicts

^{xiii} As assumed when delineating the theoretical framework, the presence of a *confusion* strategy is challenging to establish from an outsider's perspective; in this case, Finnmark's demands might actually have been regarded as realistic options by Finnmark's representatives.

In Troms and Finnmark in particular, strategies applied by the regional actors were sometimes targeted at the national political level, more than at the neighbouring *fylke*. A prominent instance of this is the referendum conducted in Finnmark in 2018 that served to present the citizens' opposition against the merger to the national government. The *folkeavstemning* can be understood as a means to incorporate the citizens, constituting a further actor group largely against the merger, into the process, thus expanding the conflict.

As noted earlier, there can be an overlap between *extension of conflicts* and other strategies. The inclusion of Rogaland or Telemark into the merger [discussion], earlier categorised as a *confusion* strategy, arguably also constitutes an instance where a new element was brought up, enlarging the discourse.

Other strategies

It remains open to debate whether Finnmark engaged in a strategy of boycott, as it has been suggested by external commentators (see e.g. Furunes et al. 2018). Ragnhild Vassvik herself on the other hand stated that Finnmark *did not* boycott the merger (Hamran 20210). The former *fylkesordfører* in that context points to the numerous rounds of negotiations Finnmark *did* take part in.

Recipients of strategies

When studying the regional party-political standings on the merger issue, it became evident that to a large degree, the regional party branches followed their national party's standpoint on the merger; this is especially true for Høyre leading the national government. These findings stress that it is difficult to evaluate a party's strategy *solely* on regional grounds.

It can be established that not all resistance in Finnmark was targeted at the neighbouring region. In a newspaper article, Randi Karlstrøm, leader of the protest group *ForFinnmark*, issued her concerns that the (merger) process would spoil the relationship between Troms and Finnmark (Nielsen and Olsen 2018). Reacting on Finnmark's opposition to the Gardermoen agreement, Troms' Cecilie Myrseth suggested that disagreement was not actually directed against Troms, but targeted the national government. "*Eg trur ikkje det først og fremst handlar om misnøye med Troms. Det er Høgre, Frp, Venstre og KrF som har bestemt samanslåinga [...]. Men det er jo alltid lettast å ta dei som ligg nærast*" (Trovåg and Furunes 2018).

T2 wonders whether the way the merger of Troms and Finnmark was conducted actually followed an intentional strategy *by the national government*. By exhausting Troms and Finnmark until a certain point, the government would eventually have had the option to say that

the regions were incapable of conducting the merger themselves, allowing for the national level to step in and dictate the merger's modalities. "*Vi holdt på å slite partiet fullstendig i stykker i Troms og Finnmark og jeg satt og spekulert på om 'er dette er noe man vil?' – det er en måte å rive partiet på og hvis jeg hadde vært partistrateg i et borgerlig parti, så hadde jeg tenkt 'ja, det gjør ikke meg noe.'*" This certainly is speculative; the fact that a representative from Troms' political level would come with this suggestion still constitutes an interesting finding. It, again, supports the dynamics of strategies being directed at different actors within a multilevel governance framework. This means that regional actors can target strategies at the national level and vice-versa and, for a better understanding of (the) reform processe(s), this multilevel dynamic has to be taken into account.

VI.IV. Moderating factors / alternative explanations

This subchapter looks at alternative explanations for the differences in the merger processes in Agder and in Troms and Finnmark, factors that appeared to have had a moderating effect on the role of strategies applied by regional actors. The respective factors are based on information obtained in the interviews that *could not* be integrated into arguments, cleavages or strategies. They accordingly belong to the other, moderating part of the analytical framework [Figure 1] and constitute structural factors. This chapter attempts to connect these findings to the academic discussions on local government reforms introduced in the literature review [II.I].

Top-down vs. bottom-up process dynamics

Top-down approaches have been seen as less promising to local government reforms than more inclusive approaches comprehending bottom-up components (Dollery and Drew 2018, Uddin 2017). Voluntary mergers are seen to have larger opportunities for long term success (Robotti and Dollery 2018).

In Agder, whereas the nabosamtaler were initiated based on the national government's call, Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder agreed on merging on a voluntary basis. The terms of the merger were negotiated between the regional representatives and in dialogue with the national government. Although following a top-down initiative, there accordingly has been a bottom-up component in the merger of the Agder regions. It was, for example, the *fylker* who suggested the *fylkesmann* to be allocated to Arendal in order to obtain a division of job places between the two largest towns. VA2 states that one of their strengths *was* merging voluntarily, coming as a natural step after intensive cooperation over a longer period of time. This supports the suggestion that, for a merger to be successful, the decision to merge should come from the

subnational level concerned (Robotti and Dollery 2009). It hereby also supports the classification of Agder as a case of a successful merger.

T2 suggests that reforms should be conducted based on bottom-up initiatives and explains the failure of the merger of Troms and Finnmark with the fact that the national government imposed the merger in spite of regional resistance. F1, too, stresses that the merger went against the standpoints of the regional political majority.

A comparison of the cases thus confirms that voluntary mergers with an emphasis on bottom-up elements enjoy a larger change for long-term success.

Institutional factors

In Troms and Finnmark, different steering forms, *parlamentarisme* in Troms and *formannskap* in Finnmark, as well as different internal party cultures in the two branches of Arbeiderpartiet, were an obstacle to conducting the merger. In Troms, equipped with the mandate given by the *fylkesting*, the representatives sent to the *fellesnemnda* had some discretion to decide on details, whereas in Finnmark, most conflictive decisions were handled at party leadership's level. Given that a part of Finnmark Arbeiderpartiet's leadership did *not* sit in the *fylkesting* themselves, these individuals could, being distinctly against the merger, hamper the process.

At first, representatives from both Troms and Finnmark were convinced about their respective political (steering) system, making it difficult to agree on the steering model for the new region and, in the aftermath, difficult for Finnmark's representatives to adapt to the new system. The controversy between *parlamentarisme* and *formannskap* constitutes an instance of clash of different political-administrative systems, complicating the merger's conduction.

These institutional differences might have *led to* the establishment of different political cultures, Finnmark's representatives being accustomed to including the opposition into higher level political decisions, whereas Troms would follow a *parlamentarisme* based system including a distinct government.

Political culture

Political culture can be defined as “a set of shared views and normative judgments held by a population regarding its political system” (Winkler 2020). Political culture is thus not centred around particular actors, but defines a view and an evaluation of the political system as a whole. Political culture is attributed to a collective group – such can be a country, a region or a social group, as, in this case, the political elite.

Behnke et al. 2011 propose that reform success is facilitated by a political culture which is based on “sequential conflict accommodation, avoiding a situation in which one group is the

all-time winner and others are all-time losers” (Behnke et al. 2011, p. 465). This, again, points to the benefits of a process based on *compromising* and *compensation*, as successfully applied in the case of Agder.

Behnke et al. (2011) suggested that fragmented societies or consensus democracies are better equipped to succeed in territorial reforms in that they are more capable of offering “a genuine problem solving attitude, acceptance of flexible solutions” (Behnke et al. 2011, p. 465) and broader discourse. This might be applied for explaining the mixed results of the Norwegian reform case(s). Norway is a unitary state with a comparatively homogenous society; it yet at the same time constitutes a consensus democracy. The country might therefore have been less well prepared for engaging in a territorial reform than fragmented societies, but still better than homogenous countries with a more competitive political pattern. The assumed “lack of fragmentation” has apparently played out in Finnmark where the people’s own perception of identity *does* differ from the Southern Norwegian one, even though, admittedly, *finnmarkinger* do not constitute an ethnic group themselves. Identity, as discussed with a regard to arguments applied by the interviewees [VI.I], is a concept closely related to culture, yet not identical [see e.g. Anheiner 2020].

Time

The approach in Agder differed from the procedure in other regions. In Agder, they already had drafted a detailed report before actually agreeing on the merger at the regional parliamentary level. Troms and Finnmark operated the other way around – they constituted the *fellesnemnda* just in the end of 2018 and then only disposed of a short amount of time to prepare the new regional structure. Although this relates back to the fact that Finnmark *did not want* the merger and that a reversal was prospected, Agder’s complementary modus operandi can be seen as one of the factors explaining why the merger went especially well in Agder.

Time has in fact been mentioned by respondents as a factor that differed between the merger cases in Agder and Troms and Finnmark. Yet, time might rather constitute an outcome of the level of conflict in the merger processes – experiencing lower levels of conflict and coming to an agreement at an earlier stage, Agder was simply left with more time to negotiate the conditions of the merger and the structure of the new region.

Path dependency, in a broader understanding, points to the assumption that “history matters” in a sense that preceding stages impact outcomes at a later point in time (Pierson 2000). Historically, Agder had, as *Agdesiden len* in the 17th century, constituted a unit before. This common past contributed to the earlier mentioned shared identity of Agder’s population. Path dependency can also be detected in Finnmark’s resistance to a reform imposed by the national level, with a regard to what by one of Finnmark’s representatives has been labelled as a “*kolonitilnærming*”.

VI.V. Main analytical findings

In terms of arguments, on a size dimension, the benefits of economies of scale have been prominently applied by reform supporters in Agder, but also in Troms og Finnmark; reform opponents would highlight the distance of citizens to the new regional centre of gravity. Identity has played a larger role in the case of Troms and Finnmark, being employed as an argument against merging. Identity can be understood as path dependent, with Agder having constituted a unit at an earlier point in time, thus sharing a form of common identity.

The centre-periphery cleavage between, and, particularly in the case of Agder, *within* the former fylker, has been found the dominating cleavage in both merger processes. Concrete conclusions on the role of cross-cutting versus overlapping cleavages, as proposed by Klausen et al. 2019, can therefore not be drawn for this study. The empirical findings stress the predominance of the centre-periphery cleavage in the reform context(s), outshining potential interaction assumed to occur within a “constellation of multiple cleavages” (Behnke et al. 2011).

With a regard to strategies, *compensation* or *compromising* have been applied in both merger cases. *Compensation* was crucial to Agder’s successful merger process, conceding state jobs to Arendal, while Kristiansand would become the headquarters for regional administration. In Troms and Finnmark, *compromises* were obtained in terms of the division of leadership over both regions and sending an equal number of representatives to the *fellesnemnda*.

The *coalition building* between Høyre obtaining votes in favour of the merger in December 2016 from FrP was central to the passing of the merger in Aust-Agder *fylkesting*. Troms’ insisting on having Finnmark participate in the merger process, also having the same number of members in the *fellesnemnda*, can be seen as an attempt of *coalition building*.

Whereas the administration is seen to have aligned with its regional politicians at least in Aust-Agder and in Troms and it played a role in all former regions, it here is assumed to have been important on how the merger was conducted, but not decisive on whether the merger took place. NHO formed an alliance with Høyre in favour of the merger in Agder; *Fagforbundet* aligned with the merger opponents [including parts of Arbeiderpartiet] in both merger cases.

Non-resolving conflicts was a major strategy in Troms and Finnmark after the constitution of the *fellesnemnda*, (aimed at) facilitating the expected future reversal of the merger.

Confusion strategies can be seen in issuing demands unlikely to be fulfilled, such as the further inclusion of Rogaland and Telemark in the negotiations in the case of Agder or the regional capital and common administration being moved to Vadsø for Finnmark.

Strategies were not always targeted at other actors at the regional level, but also at the national political level and vice-versa; hence, they occurred within a multilevel framework.

With a regard to moderating factors, the institutional differences between Finnmark having a *formannskapsmodell* and Troms employing *parlamentarisme* constituted an obstacle to the merger. In terms of political culture, the benefits of a culture employing conflict accommodation to avoid all-time winners versus all-time losers again points to the role of *compromising* and *compensation*.

Given these findings, a strategies' perspective to the study of reform processes at the subnational level can be confirmed a fruitful approach. There are opportunities for actors to shape a reform based on their preferences and capacity; actors *can* influence the process. This has been observed when entrepreneurs in both cases adapted strategies, such as the development of *compensation* or *compromise* instruments in order to facilitate the merger, whereas reform opponents would, e.g., employ *confusion* or *extension of conflict* strategies. There accordingly is room for entrepreneurship, whereas cleavages present and the relationship to the national level set limits to the use of strategies; they at the same time open up for strategic action of actors and (the building of) coalitions. In terms of the relationship to the national level, actors are constrained by the formal limits set for the reform process; they can [and did] at the other hand make use of (contact channels to) the national level to shape the conditions of the reform. The activation of conflict dimensions could, e.g., be noted with regard to identity [see lesson ii., VII.I].

VII. Conclusions

VII.I. Conclusion

Which strategies have been applied by regional politicians in the process towards the regional merger(s)? To what degree can the strategies applied explain the variation in reform outcomes – Agder engaging in a voluntary merger, Troms and Finnmark eventually being forced to merge by the Storting?

Strategies as based on the theoretical framework suggested *can* be detected in the regional actors' actions. In the case of Agder, a *compensation* and *compromising* strategy has proven successful; the major example of this would be the location of the *fylkesmann* and some divisions of the *fylkeskommune* to Arendal to guarantee jobs in Aust-Agder's former capital. In Troms og Finnmark, too, the *fylkesmann* was located to the respectively smaller town of Vadsø; yet, this process has apparently not been regarded as much connected to the *fylkessammenslåing* as it was in Agder; this can only partly be explained by the fact that the time incongruence was larger as Troms and Finnmark decided on the conditions of the merger later than did Agder. Coalitions were established between different actors, with one of the most important instances of *coalition building* in Aust-Agder occurring when Høyre included a paragraph on prospective future enlargement of the region into its proposal to the *fylkesting*, thereby obtaining the three decisive votes from FrP. The involvement of additional actors, such as by the 2018 *folkeavstemning* in Finnmark, can be understood as an *extension of conflicts*.

In Agder, negotiations with state institutions were required to secure the location of national jobs to Arendal, as part of the compensation strategy outlined earlier. These findings call for further studies investigating the strategic action that occurred *between* the two different levels of government, thus also accounting for strategies applied by the national government in order to facilitate the regional merger processes.

The failure of the merger process in Finnmark on the one hand and the successful merger in Agder on the other hand cannot solely be explained by looking at the strategies applied by regional political actors. Put differently, the strategies at the regional level are not *sufficient* in explaining the largely different outcomes; it instead has shown advantageous to study the *interaction* of strategies and structural factors, such as manifested by cleavages.

Although not provided for in the interview guide, for the case of Troms and Finnmark, the role of identity has to be highlighted. Finnmark's identity is recognised as distinct by actors both in Agder and Troms and Finnmark. In Agder, on the other hand, there already was a form of identity common to inhabitants both in former Aust-Agder and Vest-Agder. Identity can be classified as an *argument* applied by regional actors reasoning for or against the merger. It can on the other hand be seen as a further factor distinguishing the merger of Troms and Finnmark and the Agder-*fylker*, a factor that made a merger of Troms and Finnmark less likely to succeed. In terms of cleavages, the predominance of the centre-periphery cleavage, as characterised typical for the Norwegian case by Baldersheim and Rose (2010), can be confirmed for the merger cases studied. Based on the empirical findings, an interplay between multiple cleavages,

being either overlapping or cross-cutting, cannot be detected and remains an area for further research.

Some major lessons can be drawn from this study.

- i. The reform cases of Agder and Troms and Finnmark strengthen the assumption that studying strategies within a national reform context matters in explaining reforms of subnational government units. This includes both the targeting of regional strategies towards the national level and the finding that national strategies can be grounded on regional interests. Whereas reform strategies tend to be studied from a national politics angle, this work, although focusing on the regional level, opens up for a multi-level perspective. As outlined in the analysis [VI.], the role of multilevel dynamics hereby differed for Høyre and Arbeiderpartiet. In the case of Høyre, the national party branch representing the national government shaped standpoints and actions at the regional level. For Arbeiderpartiet, in particular Finnmark Arbeiderparti, contact went both ways, implying that important premises for Arbeiderpartiet's national politics were based on regional standpoints and processes.
- ii. Strategies should be studied as embedded in a structural framework, manifested in cleavages over, e.g., cultural and institutional configurations. This framework constrains actors' opportunities for strategic action; at the same time, it opens up for entrepreneurship. For instance, actors *can* strategically play the identity card, identity being part of the framework. This has been the case in Finnmark, where reform opponents suggested that a merger with Troms would threaten Finnmark's population's distinct identity. Actors build strategies which take into account structural factors, strategies being constrained and opened up for by cleavages. There is an interplay between strategy and the (political) landscape. Actors are in need of knowledge over this landscape, but at the same time, the landscape can be changed. The latter has especially been the case in Finnmark, with the reform functioning as a shaping event. This can, again, be illustrated with a regard to identity – although present as an underlying issue before, the identity dimension has, during the merger process, successfully been activated by entrepreneurs and gained relevance.
- iii. Some cleavages have a potential for mobilisation that is appropriate in some, but not in other contexts. Many conflicts are located around the centre-periphery axis. Their activation is dependent on the coincidence with other cleavages and previous reform (attempts). The latter means that it is the larger reform context that opens for the

application of (local) strategies as entrepreneurs can connect different reforms, making it easier to apply strategies running against the merger(s). An instance of this can be seen in when reform opponents referred to the future of hospitals in Aust-Agder even though hospitals *were not* part of *regionreformen*, but had been a latent source of conflict since the *sykehusreform* of 2001. In Norway, partly in parallel to the regional reform, reforms of police and court districts as well as, obviously, *kommunereformen*, took place, allowing for reform opponents to draw a connection between these reforms and depicting *regionreformen* as yet another case of an overarching trend of consolidation.

- iv. Norway constitutes a unitary country, in spite of high levels of local autonomy. This can, with a regard to Agder, be seen as a facilitating factor to territorial reforms, allowing the national level to support the regions in conducting reforms by making concessions in terms of workplaces. It can, on the other hand, provoke conflicts, when the national level is not acquainted to engaging in a dialogue with the regional level. There certainly is contact and exchange between the different political-administrative levels in Norway; the focus might yet rather tend to lie on the national and the local, more than the regional level. This can turn out problematic given that for long-term success, reforms with a regional component, decided upon at the national level, are dependent on the [cooperation of the] regional level.
- v. From a methodological point of view, an approach based on both interviews conducted in the aftermath of the merger(s) and text documents produced during the merger(s) has proven fruitful to the study of merger processes at the regional level. Qualitative expert interviews have made it possible to detect strategies as well as arguments for and against the mergers that can be expected difficult to be found by other methods, e.g., standardised questionnaires. In several instances, findings from the documents and interviews were overlapping, thus validating the interview results. In other instances, interview and document standpoints did not fully match, hinting at a more ambivalent constellation and a calling for a more cautious interpretation of interview statements. The same is true for arguments on which process descriptions varied between the different interview objects.

VII.II. Potential for generalisation and limitations

The lessons mentioned above can be generalised to the study of other public sector reforms, particularly with a regard to reforms that include a geographic dimension. This multi-level

perspective of reforms can be generalised to other types of reforms; levels can be, dependent on the respective political-administrative system, national, regional, local or supranational.

Based on the lessons learned, the following assumptions can be established and call for examination by future research.

- i. If, within a reform process in a multi-level framework, there are conflicts at the subnational level, actors will involve the national level.
- ii. If territorial reforms are to obtain long-term success in a multi-level system, they call for the national government to take into account subnational needs.
- iii. If mergers are prospected between two regions, of one which is significantly larger in population size or political power, a centre-periphery cleavage will be activated.
- iv. Compensation and compromise are crucial to facilitate and enable merger processes.

The case study design applied qualifies as an adequate way to study the reform processes in Agder and Troms and Finnmark. The given study might yet have been extended by further interviews with other actors. These could be regional politicians from other parties, such as representatives from FrP in Agder who have been seen to have played a crucial role in the vote for a voluntary merger. It should also be of interest to interview employees of the regional administration as their role in preparing the merger process has been acknowledged for both cases.

Conducting the interviews, it became evident that focusing solely on the strategies at the regional level does not fully account for the interaction with the national level. Regional politicians enacted strategies supporting or hindering a merger targeted at the national government. An example of this is the application of the *folkeavstemning* in Finnmark, its results being delivered directly to Erna Solberg in order to prove Finnmark's population disagreement with the merger. It could therefore have been advantageous to include national politicians concerned with the merger into the group of interviews; such an approach is not about neglecting the role of regional actors, but about better accounting for strategic action present *between* regional and national actors. This also relates to the fact that in Norway, regional politics are highly impacted by national politics and often, national party lines are applied at the regional level, explaining why the regional branches of the national governing parties Venstre, KrF, FrP and Høyre went in for a merger even though not all of their representatives necessarily were in favour of it. Summing up, this study *did* account for regional strategies targeted at the national level, but less so vice-versa.

Whereas this thesis' method has proven successful, its findings could be *supplemented* by further research. Surveys issued to further regional politicians – be it in the context of the same merger case or for other mergers within the Norwegian regional government reform, the latter requiring further previous documentary research – might be an option to quantify the insights obtained by the given work. Such could for example include Likert scale items to establish how much weight was given to a specific issue by the interviewees. A purely quantitative approach instead of the case study design applied is yet considered a less promising approach. Conducting qualitative expert interviews *has proven successful* for detecting strategies as well as arguments for and against the mergers. These are expectedly difficult to find by standardised questionnaires.

Within the chosen methodological framework, limitations can ex post be found with regard to the interview guide. Coding and analysing the interview material, it became evident that whereas a lot of information obtained was about alignment and coalitions, less information has been gained in terms of how contact initially was initiated. It could have been advantageous to include a further interview question asking more directly about contact patterns and how contact *was established*. This might have been advantageous for detecting further instances of *alliance building*.

The interview guide contains a question about dominant actors in the merger process. This has opened for a list of relevant actors or entrepreneurs; yet, most of the other interview questions were targeted at the strategic action of the respondent's party, more than at individual action. This focus explains why most of the results obtained are about party-political, collective, action, more than about the role of single entrepreneurs. Whereas this can be considered a weakness of this study with regard to the previously established theoretical framework, its actual implications might be smaller than expected. For most of the merger process, the political entrepreneurs, that is especially the *fylkesordfører* or *fylkesrådmann* and the regional party leaders were seen to act in line with their party's preferences. In spite of internal controversies, by the time of voting at the *fylkesting* level, both Arbeiderpartiet and Høyre would *mostly* as a unitary actor.

With regard to the above-mentioned limitations of the interview guide, it has to be noted that the guide itself has been applied flexibly, allowing for the actors to answer questions in different orders, based on the suggestion that semi-structured interviews should comprehend room for adaption. This has been found beneficial for the interview setting, with some actors themselves

coming with interesting insights that a priori had not been considered. It on the other hand made it more challenging to obtain comparable answers on all questions provided.

As of today, the merger of Troms and Finnmark is supposed to be reversed by 2024, based on the option for reversal included into the platform of the centre-left government established in late 2021. It will be interesting to follow up on the process dynamics of reversing – both at the regional level and in exchange with the national government. The fact that Troms and Finnmark did make use of the first option to reverse the merger, whereas interest in such has not been issued by the new Agder, confirms the categorisation of Troms og Finnmark as a failed and Agder on the other hand as a successful merger case – although, admittedly, the option for reversal was not foreseen for Agder given that it did not constitute an enforced merger.

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IX. Annex

IX.I. Glossary Norwegian terms

Norwegian term	English translation	Explanation / context
Arbeiderpartiet (Ap)	Labour party	Norwegian labour party
Årsmøte	Annual meeting	Parties' annual meeting
Dokumentcenter	Documentation centre	/
Fagforbundet	/	Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees
Fellesnemnda	Joint committee	Committee preparing the merger, established after the decision in the <i>fylkesting</i> , comprising an equal number of representatives of both former <i>fylker</i>
Forhandlingsutvalg	Negotiation committee	Interregional committee tasked with preparing the merger
Formannskapslovene	Local Government Act	1837 act establishing Norway's modern division of local and regional government
Formannskapsmodell	/	Refers to a form of organising the local or regional government in which parties' share in the <i>fylkesting</i> is reflected in the number of representatives the parties obtain in the various leadership positions, boards, councils and committees

Fremskrittspartiet (FrP)	Progress party	Norwegian right-wing party
Fylke	Region	Subnational level in the Norwegian government system
Fylkeskommune	Region	See <i>fylke</i> , applied especially when talking of a region's administrative apparatus
Fylkesmann	County Governor	National government representative to the regional level
Fylkesmannsembete	/	The <i>fylkesmann</i> 's office
Fylkesordfører	/	Leader of the fylkesting
Fylkesråd	/	Steering committee under a parliamentary model
Fylkesrådsleder	/	Leader of the <i>fylkesråd</i> under <i>parlamentarisme</i>
Fylkesting	County Council	County Council
Fylkesutvalg	/	Steering committee under a formannskapsmodell
Fylkestingsvedtak	Decision taken by the County Council	Refers to the decision on merging at the regional level, taken in the <i>fylkesting</i> in Agder in December 2016
Gardermoenavtale	Gardermoen agreement	Agreement on the conditions of a merger between Troms and Finnmark obtained at the Gardermoen negotiations; later rejected by Finnmark
Gruppeleder	Group leader	Leader of a party's representatives to the <i>fylkesting</i>
Høyre (H)	/	Norwegian conservative party

Innbyggerundersøkelse	Citizens' survey	Population survey, non-binding; conducted in Agder in the forefront of the 2020 merger
Intensjonsavtale	Agreement of intent	Preliminary agreement on negotiating on a later agreement
Kristelig Folkeparti (KrF)	Christian People's Party	Norwegian Christian Democratic party
Kommunal- og moderniseringsdepartementet	Ministry for local government and modernisation	National ministry responsible for the conduction of <i>regionreformen</i>
Kommune	Municipality	Local level of government in Norway
Kommunestyret	Municipal council	Local level
Kommunereform	Municipality reform	Reform of the Norwegian local government structure, occurred in parallel to <i>regionreformen</i>
Landsorganisasjonen i Norge (LO)	Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions	Largest umbrella organisation of labour unions in Norway
Miljøpartiet De Grønne (MDG)	/	Norwegian environmentalist party
Nabosamtaler	Neighbouring talks	Talks between neighbouring <i>fylker</i> , as invited for by minister Sanner in 2015
NAV	/	Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration
Nordområdene	/	Arctic Circle area
NRK	Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation	Norwegian government-owned radio and television

		public broadcasting company
Ordfører	Mayor	Refers to municipal mayors
Parlamentarisme	Parliamentarism	Refers to a form of forming a local or regional government based on the political majority in the <i>fylkesting</i>
Pensjonistpartiet	Pensioners' Party	Represented in Agder <i>fylkesting</i>
Referendum	Referendum	Refers to the 2018 referendum in Finnmark; de facto non-binding
Regionreformen	Regional reform	The Norwegian regional government reform
Rødt	Red Party	Norwegian left-wing party
Sammenslåing	Merger	Can refer to both municipality and regional mergers; here predominantly used for regional mergers
Senterpartiet (Sp)	Centre party	Norwegian agrarian party
Spesialhelsetjenesten	Specialist health services	Responsible for somatic and psychiatric hospitals and other institutions including the ambulance service
Statens vegvesen	/	Norwegian Public Roads Administration
Statsforvalter	County Governor	New name for <i>fylkesmannen</i> by 2021
Statssekretær	State secretary	Partisan political position in the national government, secondary to the minister
Sosialistisk Venstre (SV)	Socialist left	Norwegian left-wing party
Statsminister	Prime minister	Norwegian prime minister

Storting	/	Norwegian national parliament
Tettsted	/	Urban area
Tvangssammenslåing	Enforced merger	Mergers that were decided upon by the <i>Storting</i> in spite of regional disagreement
Utkant	Outskirt	Refers to municipalities located distant from the regional centre
Venstre (V)	Left	Norwegian liberal party
Videregående skole (VGS)	Upper Secondary School	Part of the responsibilities of the <i>fylkeskommuner</i>

IX.II. Interview guide

Intro

- kan du gi en kort presentasjon av deg selv, området du er / var ansvarlig for og rollen din i sammenslåingsprosessen av fylke A og fylke B?

Hovedpart

- kan du med noen få ord beskrive prosessen av fylkessammenslåingen mellom ditt tidligere fylke A og fylke B [med fokus på hvordan prosessen gikk fram til beslutningen om sammenslåing var tatt]?
- hva opplevde du som de største utfordringene i sammenslåingsprosessen?

Arbeidet fram til fylkestingsvedtak

- hva var hovedargumentene som ble diskutert før eller mot en sammenslåing av fylke A og fylke B? – hva var viktigst for fylke A? – hva var viktigst for ditt partilag?
- [hvordan ble argumentene kommunisert?]
- kan du karakterisere noe sentrale skillelinjer mellom reformopponentene og reformtilhengerne?
- var det noen veldig dominerende aktører i prosessen fram til vedtaket?
- ditt partilag var *for* en sammenslåing av Troms og Finnmark / Agder-fylkene – hvordan engasjerte du deg / dere dere for å få et flertall i fylkesting(ene) for å søke om sammenslåing?
- hva var posisjonen til vetospillerne og deres strategier?
- ditt partilag var *mot* en sammenslåing av Troms og Finnmark / Agder-fylkene – hvordan engasjerte du deg / dere dere for å få et flertall i fylkesting(ene) for å *ikke* søke om sammenslåing?
- hva var posisjonen til reformtilhengerne og deres strategier?
- hvor realistisk var egentlig forslagene til å inkludere flere fylker – dvs. enten Rogaland eller Telemark – i en ny region?
- [hvilke ressurser kunne dere gjøre bruk av i prosessen?]

Samarbeid med forskjellige aktører

- hvordan synes du fungerte samarbeidet mellom fylkestingspolitikere i sammenslåingsprosessen?
- hvordan synes du fungerte samarbeidet mellom de to fylkeslag av ditt parti i sammenslåingsprosessen?

- hvordan synes du fungerte samarbeidet med andre (regionale) aktører i sammenslåingsprosessen, f.eks. næringslivet, (lokale) medier? – hvordan ble andre aktører integrert i prosessen? – ble det knyttet noen allianser?
- hvordan fungerte samarbeidet med ditt nasjonale partilag?
- var det kontakt med statlige aktører / myndigheter – om ja, med hvem?
- hvor mye rom var det for lokale / regionale synspunkter i prosessen?
- hvordan handtere dere spørsmål som det var mest diskusjon om – gi gjerne et eksempel [gjelder samspill med andre aktører]?
- hvilken rolle spilte de to fylkeshovedstedene, Tromsø og Vadsø, i konflikten, hvordan fungerte samarbeid med de lokale aktører der [dvs. kommunestyret etc.]?
- var det flere byer / kommuner [Alta?] som hadde en særstilling i prosessen?
- hvilken rolle spilte de to største byene i fylket, Kristiansand og Arendal, i konflikten, hvordan fungerte samarbeid med de lokale aktører der [dvs. kommunestyret etc.]?
- hadde det noe å si at Arbeiderpartiet stilte ordføreren i begge Aust-Agder og Arendal, mens Høyre styrte i Vest-Agder og Kristiansand?

Samarbeid med forskjellige aktører

- hvordan ble samarbeid etter etableringen av fellesnemnda i desember 2018?

Utblick

- hvor ser du forskjellene mellom det tidligere sammenslåingsforsøket i 2011 og 2020-sammenslåingen?
- er det noe som du synes er viktig som vi ikke har snakket om, har du noen anbefalinger?

Colour code

*Question applied in Agder

*Question applied in Troms and Finnmark

*Question applied when talking to reform opponents

*Question applied when talking to reform proponents

IX.III. Information letter to the interview objects

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet **«prosessen mot fylkesreformen i Norge 2020»?**

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å *studere faktorene som påvirket prosessen rundt fylkesreformen 2020 i Agder og Troms og Finnmark*. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Formålet er å finne ut hvilke faktorer påvirket reformprosessen i Agder og i Troms og Finnmark og hvordan forskjeller i prosessen – Agder som inngikk i en frivillig sammenslåing versus Troms og Finnmark som ble tvangssammenslått fra Stortingets side – kan forklares. Informasjon skal bli samlet ved bruk av kvalitative intervjuer med aktører som var involvert i prosessen.

Prosjektet er en Masteroppgave ved Instituttet for Administrasjon og Organisasjon på Universitet i Bergen.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Jacob Aars er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Jeg ville først og fremst tre i kontakt med personer som var involvert i sammenslåingsprosessen, f.eks. ved å delta i fellesnemnda.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Intervjuene skal gjennomføres ved bruk av en intervjuguide og skal ta mellom 45 minutter og en time. Intervjuene blir registrert ved bruk av lydopptak og transkripsjon blir etterhvert oppbevart som elektronisk dokument.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket. *Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil jeg erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data. Fylket du tidligere representerte og partiet du er medlem i vil kunne gjenkjennes i publikasjonen.*

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes/oppgaven er godkjent.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra *Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet / Institutt for administrasjon og organisasjonsvitenskap, UiB* har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at

behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

I. Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til NSD sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS på epost (personverntjenester@nsd.no) eller på telefon: 55 58 21 17.

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Vårt personvernombud: Janecke Helene Veim, Janecke.Veim@uib.no, +47 55 58 20 29

Med vennlig hilsen

Jacob Aars
(Forsker/veileder)

Sophia-Charlotte Maria-Katharina Hahn

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet *prosessen mot fylkesreformen i Norge 2020*, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta i *intervjuet*
- at *opplysninger om meg publiseres slik at jeg kan gjenkjennes*

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

IX.IV. Categorisation scheme

Name	Description / comment
arguments	arguments applied by regional politicians explaining their standings on the merger
arguments contra merger	
arguments in favour of a larger merger	particularly relevant in the case of Agder with the potential inclusion of Rogaland or Telemark
arguments pro merger	
cleavages	
centre-periphery	
cross-cutting	
geography	
left-right	
overlapping	remained uncoded
cooperation - contact with other actors	cooperation and contact patterns between different actors
actors, residual	includes Sami interest
administration	
business world	
local media	
municipalities	
national party	
politicians of the fylkesting, other parties	
regional branch of the same party	

Name	Description / comment
state actors	
trade union	
entrepreneurs	majorly based on the interview question on dominant actors
identity	in the empirics and analysis, identity has been treated as an <i>argument</i>
information on the interview object	
post-merger decision perspective	covers the period <i>after</i> establishing the <i>fellesnemnda</i>
previous merger attempt	refers to the 2011-merger attempt in Agder
process description	includes both description and assessment
challenges	
handling of conflicts	
process, residual	
what went well	
residual	
strategies	strategic action by regional political actors
coalition building	
compensation	
compromising	
confusion	
non-resolving conflicts	
strategies, residual	

This code book has been exported from Nvivo, including the names of the so-called Nodes [categories]. Descriptions and comments have, where deemed necessary, been added manually in the aftermath.