

Chapter 4

Local Government Reforms in Denmark and Norway

Reform Tools and Outcomes

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Introduction

Reforming the territorial structure of local governments is a recurring item on governmental agendas in Europe and beyond (Gunlicks, 1981; Kjellberg and Dente, 1988; Meligrana, 2004). Many governments have seen merging of local governments into fewer and larger units as a way of boosting efficiency, saving costs, improving the quality of public service provision and achieving overall modernization (Baldersheim and Rose, 2010: 244; Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014). In Scandinavia and North-Western Europe, broad-scale reforms in the 1960s and 1970s have been explained as ‘institutional afterthoughts’ of public sector expansion following the development of highly decentralized welfare states (Ashford, 1982; Kjellberg, 1985;). More recent reforms have been seen as a response to new demands posed by Europeanization, for instance in Greece (Hlepas, 2010). Some countries in Central-Eastern Europe saw structural reform as a necessary counter-reaction to increasing

fragmentation of local government systems in the years after the fall of the iron curtain (Swianiewicz, 2010; de Vries and Sobis, 2014), or as in Macedonia, to consolidate democratic rule (Kreci and Ymeri, 2010). In a comparative perspective, however, comprehensive reforms are few and far between. Many national and federal governments in Europe are constitutionally barred from implementing imposed reforms (Gendźwiłł et al, forthcoming) and have to rely on a mixture of persuasion and economic incentives if they want local governments to merge. Because merger reforms are often contentious, governmental reform initiatives have in some cases been rendered ineffective or downright torpedoed by political and institutional resistance. Finland's torturous recent reform history is a telling example. While a government-initiated reform in 2005–11 reduced the number of units by only about a quarter, a new reform attempt by the Katainen government in 2011–14 proved almost wholly ineffective (Sandberg, 2014).

The high diversity of reform outcomes and the varying political and constitutional preconditions for reform implementation inspires interest in governmental reform strategies, and more specifically in the toolbox of reform instruments that any given government has at its disposal. A growing literature on 'the tools of government' (Salamon, 2002; Hood and Margetts, 2007) facilitates classification of policy instruments, and provides theoretical approaches for understanding why some tools are chosen over others, under given circumstances. In what is to follow, we draw on this literature for comparative analysis of recent

territorial reforms in two Scandinavian countries: Denmark and Norway. As decentralized, social democratic welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990) in the North European class of local government systems (Sharpe, 1979) with highly autonomous local governments (Ladner et al, 2016) and long-standing traditions for multilevel democracy (Sellers et al, 2020), these two countries offer excellent opportunities for comparative analysis as most similar cases. Notably, in both countries, central authorities are legally mandated to impose mergers on unwilling local governments, thereby enabling the full range of governmental policy instruments. Even so, the outcome of the two reforms differed substantially. While the reform in Denmark in 2007 reduced the number of local governments from 271 to 98 virtually overnight (Blom-Hansen et al, 2014), Norway's recent reform, completed in January 2020, only resulted in a cutback from 428 to 356 units (Klausen et al, 2019). Furthermore, while the Danish system following the reform comprises very few units with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, the median-sized unit in Norway has 5,151 inhabitants, and 21 local governments have three-digit population figures.

Many factors probably explain why the two reforms had such different outcomes. In this chapter, we focus on the reform instruments put to use by the Danish and the Norwegian governments. What policy tools did the two governments choose, how and with what effect?

This chapter is structured as follows. In the following section, we discuss some key aspects of the literature on tool choice, with an emphasis on how these tools

can be used in the context of multi-level governance. Two sections describe the reforms in Denmark and Norway, highlighting the most prominent policy tools put to use by the two governments. In the final section, the results of the two case studies are analyzed comparatively. The chapter is based on previous research carried out by the authors and others.

Theoretical perspectives on policy tools

It is uncontroversial to claim that governmental decisions are sometimes ineffective, not least when implementation relies on a complex chain of actors on several levels of government. As noted, great expectations in Washington are often dashed in Oakland (Pressman and Wildavsky, 1984). While the academic literature on policy implementation largely has ground to a halt (Hill and Hupe, 2014), increasing interest is devoted to the instruments that governments employ to reach their goals. A policy tool is defined as ‘an identifiable method through which collective action is structured to address a public problem’ (Salamon, 2002: 19). Because this definition in practice comprises everything governments do, the utility of the ‘tool’ term relies on classification and the ability to decompose often complex and ambiguous policies and programmes into distinct tools belonging to one particular class. A number of classifications have been proposed, based on varying dimensions. One simple and intuitive classification draws distinction between *carrots*, *sticks* and *sermons* (Vedung et al, 1998). A classification that has gained considerable traction in the literature, is

the so-called NATO framework (Hood, 1983; Hood and Margetts, 2007). This handle is an acronym of the resources governments can use for steering society, namely *nodality, authority, treasure* and *organization*. Governments can utilize their ‘nodal’ position in societal networks, by means of information-based tools. While governmental authority is the basis for more or less coercive tools, the government’s ‘treasure’ – their financial resources – enable tools such as subsidies and grants. Finally, a class of tools are based on the government’s self-organizing capacity; the ability to carry out tasks using its own administration. We will use this framework for structuring the case studies, as it offers a simple and intuitive approach for decomposing the composite set of tools involved in local government reforms.

Although tools from each of the four categories could probably address most problems, tool choice is, in practice, always subject to constraints. Salamon (2002) noted that the choice of tools is of a distinctly political nature, because tools prioritize effectiveness, efficiency, equity, manageability and legitimacy/political support differently. For instance, highly coercive tools may prove effective and suitable for ensuring equity, but at the same time, such tools may be cumbersome and resource consuming administratively because compliance needs to be monitored. Coercive instruments can also jeopardize political support. Salamon furthermore noted that tools vary in terms of their *directness*, related to the system employed to ‘deliver’ the tool. Whereas direct tools are authorized, funded and carried out by the same authority, indirect tools involve private subcontractors, NGOs or subordinate levels of

government. Indirect tools can enhance political support, since they often provide more discretion to citizens or sub-national governments, but this advantage sometimes comes at the price of lower effectiveness and manageability. ‘Intelligent policy design’ (Hood and Margetts, 2007: 144), following this, implies deliberate choice of tools, ensuring fitness of tools for purpose while using tools economically and within the bounds of moral acceptability.

The fact that territorial reforms play out in a context of multi-level governance adds to the challenge of appropriate tool choice. The multi-level context can pose both institutional and political restrictions on the government’s choice of tools. Lower-level tiers in unitary states in many cases enjoy considerable ‘jurisdictional integrity’ (Skelcher, 2005), which to some extent insulates them from external pressures. If local governments effectively enjoy veto powers, unpopular territorial reforms may run aground in joint decision traps not uncharacteristic of intergovernmental relations in Scandinavia (Scharpf, 1988; Blom-Hansen, 1999). Arguably, reforms in multi-level systems pose particular demands on the government’s ‘enablement skills’ – to activate complex partnerships, finding the right mix of rewards and punishments to elicit cooperation and so on (Salamon, 2002: 607–608).

The Norwegian reform

Context of the reform

Norway's local government system comprised 392 units at its establishment in 1837. Due to municipal splits, the number of units increased gradually to an all-time high of 744 units in 1950. Broad-scale reform in the 1960s reduced the number to 451 (Hansen, 1991). At the start of the current reform, in 2014, the number of units was 428. Norway has a two-tier system of local and regional government. County governments with elected councils were established in 1974, and comprised of 18 units + the capital in 2014.

Norway's extensive welfare system developed gradually in the postwar period. The long prehistory of local self-rule allowed extensive decentralization of welfare provision (Sellers and Lidström, 2007), leading to dramatic growth in municipal budgets and employment. Local governments enjoy a comparatively high level of local autonomy (Ladner et al, 2016), although state supervision seems to be increasing (Goldsmith and Page, 2010).

The reform process

The national local government reform (NLGR) was initiated by the Solberg (Cons.) government in 2014, in a report to parliament (KMD, 2014a). The report called for merger of local governments into fewer and larger units in order to enhance the quality of public services, to enable comprehensive planning, to create more economically robust municipalities and to stimulate local democracy by reducing state supervision of the newly enlarged units. The reform was backed by the two parties in

government – the Conservative party and the Progress Party – as well as the government’s two supporting parties in parliament – the Liberal Party and the Christian Democrats (Klausen et al, 2019). The government proposed a two-year period for local governments to identify relevant partners to merge with and to conduct assessments, public hearings and negotiations, with the aim of agreeing on a merger proposal. Norwegian law stipulates that the government may decide on voluntary mergers by royal decree.¹ If one or more parties to the proposal disagrees, the matter has to be decided by parliament. The government warned that although mergers as a main rule should be voluntary, single local governments would not be allowed to block proposals that were otherwise considered beneficial. Consequently, imposed mergers were presented as a realistic policy tool even from the beginning of the reform. Two deadlines were set for voluntary merger proposals: February and July 2016.

The government put in place several financial incentives to encourage amalgamations (Askim et al, 2019). New local governments would be allowed to retain the current level of state transfers for the first 15 years after the merger. The government offered to reimburse process-related costs. Furthermore, new units would receive a lump sum, relative to size, to spend at their own discretion for new projects. The most prominent incentive mechanism, however, came in the form of an adjustment to the municipal grants system. Small local governments are compensated for above-average administrative costs. The government proposed to reduce this

compensation for local governments that had voluntarily abstained from reducing administrative costs by merging with one or several neighbours. Due to resistance from the two supporting parties, the adjustment was watered down. Even so, for some small local governments the adjustment represented a significant loss of revenue.

The government provided a broad range of reports, guidance materials and web-based tools to assist local governments in the voluntary assessments and negotiation phase (Klausen et al, 2016). Two reports from a fast-working expert committee preceded the reform (KMD, 2014b; KMD, 2014c; Kjærgaard et al, 2020: 36) and together with the report to parliament in 2014 (KMD, 2014a), the government had produced a substantial volume of text arguing in favour of amalgamations. These and other reports and assessments were presented on a dedicated website.² A web-based tool³ was set up to allow local governments to assess the consequences of relevant merger options for a broad range of indicators including demographic factors, municipal finances and services. Guidance materials were issued, covering issues such as the organization of the merger process, the use of instruments for public hearings and various management-related issues. The minister for local governments and modernization, Jan Tore Sanner (Cons.) promoted the reform through speeches, press releases and otherwise. However, the government did not activate the corporate channel to secure support for the reform from KS, The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (Kjærgaard et al, 2020: 50).

The county governors⁴ were tasked with coordinating the local reform processes in their own counties (Klausen et al, 2016). Each county governor's office hired a dedicated consultant to facilitate the process regionally. Because the ministry had supplied a quite general and open-ended mandate, the county governors carried out their coordinating function quite differently (Glomsrud, 2017). Whereas some county governors worked very actively to promote amalgamations, others attained a more downplayed role. In the fall of 2016, after the voluntary phase had ended, the ministry requested a recommendation report from county governors about the future local government structure in their respective counties. While some county governors proposed a number of imposed mergers, others refrained from doing so (Askim et al, 2019: 331).

The voluntary phase came off to a slow start. By the first deadline, February 2016, only five proposals involving 11 local governments had been submitted. Although 299 municipalities had signed 143 agreements of intention, many of these agreements were torpedoed by consultative referenda (221 referenda, 147 against, see Folkestad et al, 2019). The number of merger proposals increased substantially during spring, however, and there was an extension of the deadline. By the end of 2016, when all proposals from the local governments and from the county governors had been submitted, a group of four representatives in parliament's local government committee took on a very active role in terms of producing the final proposal (Klausen et al, 2019). Between them, they agreed about a list of imposed mergers to

be proposed in addition to the voluntary proposals. In February 2017, the two government parties and the two supporting parties presented a negotiated agreement about the full list of mergers. Although the Christian democrats decided that they would not support imposed mergers, the proposals achieved a bare-knuckles majority in parliament in June 2017 (KMD, 2017). The two government parties' primary position was that the second tier – the county governments – should be abolished (Klausen et al, 2019). Faced with insufficient parliamentary support for this proposal, the government instead proposed to postpone the question about the fate of the county governments. The two support parties, however, proposed that there should be a concurrent county government reform, in order to strengthen the county governments and ensure their continued existence. The two supporting parties achieved their goal by trading support for the local government reform with support for the regional reform. Contrary to the local government reform, the county government reform was implemented mainly through imposed mergers. The number of units was reduced from 18 to 11 through seven mergers in all, and only four of the mergers were voluntary. Focusing on the reform at municipal level – which was the government's initial aim – the scale of reform was more modest. The number of municipalities was reduced from 428 to 356 by merging 119 municipalities into 47 new units. Eleven of the 47 cases constituted enforced merger, as one or all of the municipalities involved did not agree with the proposal.⁵

Tool use

The main tools used by the government for implementation of the NLGR are presented in table 4.1.

Table 4.1. Governmental reform tools (Norway)

Tool class	Tool
Nodality	Reports, information materials, media statements, online tools/webpage
Authority	Threat of imposed mergers; mergers decided in parliament
Treasure	Financial incentives, adjustments to the grants system
Organization	County governors' coordination role

While the government made extensive use of nodality-based tools, in the form of reports, information materials, media statements and online tools, the government was not in a position to control the terms of the local debates. Most local governments commissioned their own reports and assessments instead of relying on the government's assessment tools. Active and vocal opposition to the reform on the national level, as well as locally, meant that the government's key arguments were subjected to profound scrutiny and criticism.

The fact that the government imposed a relatively small share of mergers means that the government, only to a limited extent, made use of authority-based tools. However, because the *threat* of imposed mergers remained until a late stage (Askim et al, 2019), indirect use of authority tools in the form of enforced mergers may have had an effect on the reform's progression. As noted by Salamon (2002: 25), 'The more coercive the tool (...) the greater the potential threat to political legitimacy.' This assumption is supported empirically. Clearly, the feasibility of

authority tools was delimited by heated controversy over imposed mergers and the minority government's reliance on support parties.

The government all in all made modest use of 'treasure' tools. Most of the financial incentives were modest, and the 'hardest' treasure tool, cuts in grants to 'voluntarily small' municipalities, was watered down. Lastly, the government's use of 'organization' tools can be characterized as rather lax, since the county governors were given quite an open-ended mandate for their activities. There is little to suggest that the county governors felt obliged to promote mergers proactively, or to propose mergers that the local governments themselves had not worked out. It should be noted that in Vestfold, the county governor assumed a particularly proactive role. In this county, all of the municipalities ended up in a merger. A related observation is that this particular county governor convinced local governments not to hold referendum. It is also noteworthy that no enforced mergers were carried out in counties where the county governor had not proposed any.

The Danish reform

Context of the reform

Like Norway, Denmark has a two-tier system of local and regional government. Apart from a voluntary amalgamation of the five municipalities on the island of Bornholm in 2002, the number of municipalities and counties remained unchanged from a local government reform in the early 1970s to 2006. For more than four decades, the local

government structure was thus composed of 275 municipalities (271 from 2002) and 14 counties + 2 capital units with a two-tier status as both counties and municipalities. However, in 2007 a quick and radical reform with three main components was implemented (Mouritzen, 2010; Blom-Hansen et al, 2014). First, 271 municipalities were by law amalgamated into 98 municipalities. Second, 14 counties were amalgamated into five regions. Third, tasks were reshuffled across the three tiers of government, primarily in the form of transferring former county tasks to the state and municipal level.

Denmark's extensive welfare system, like in Norway, developed gradually in the postwar period, and especially after the 1970 reform, an increased number of tasks have been transferred to the two tiers of local government. The long history of extensive decentralization of welfare provision (Sellers and Lidström, 2007) has turned Denmark, like Norway, into one of the most decentralized countries in the world, both when it comes to fiscal decentralization and local autonomy (Ivanyna and Shah, 2014; Ladner et al, 2016). After the local government reform in 2007, the five regions are mainly responsible for health care, while the 98 municipalities are multi-purpose units responsible for a wide range of politically and economically important welfare services such as the public schools, childcare, elderly care, children and adults with special needs, and social security (Houlberg and Ejersbo, 2020).

A notable organizational difference between Denmark and Norway is that in Norway a single organization organizes both municipalities and counties, whereas in

Denmark municipalities and counties/regions are organized by two different organizations. With the municipal organization, Local Government Denmark (LGD), as the strongest and most influential, not least after the reform.

The reform process

The reform process began with the appointment of the Commission on Administrative Structure in August 2002 by the minority coalition government composed of the Conservative and Liberal parties. The Commission had a broad mandate and 15 months to assess both the number of tiers and the structure and functions of each tier, and to suggest alternative models for a new structure and distribution of tasks (Mouritzen, 2010). Though the Commission had three independent experts as members, it was mainly composed of civil servants from ministries pertaining to both government parties and the two local government organizations. The Commission thus constituted an intra-Commission platform for mediation of interests, problem perceptions and coalition building both across the two government parties as well as with local government organizations.

In January 2004, the Commission delivered a deliberately large and inconclusive report (Mouritzen, 2009) suggesting a number of alternative models for restructuring the regional and local levels, including various elements of amalgamations and reshuffling of tasks. The report of more than 1,500 pages concluded that a reform of the structure of the public sector was needed, but the report

did not recommend any of the suggested models. The report was presented on 9 January 2002 at the largest public presentation ever of a commission report in Denmark, led by the Minister of the Interior, Lars Løkke Rasmussen (Christensen et al, 2009: 101–102). Every existing entity, from local politicians and civil servants, to researchers and interest organizations showed up – more than 900 people altogether. In addition, more than 150 journalists were present and the two national TV stations sent a three-hour long live transmission (Christensen et al, 2009: 101–102). When presenting the report – as when forming the Commission – the government did not signal any reform ambitions but kept its opponents behind a veil of vagueness (Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2010). Nevertheless, despite this confusion strategy by the government, everyone leaving the ‘presentation show’ had the impression that a major reform was inevitable.

Less than three months later, and shortly after the deadline of the hearing of the Commission’s report, the government released a reform proposal. The proposal to replace 14 counties with five health care regions without the right to levy taxes, amalgamate municipalities to at least 20,000 inhabitants and transfer virtually all former county tasks, apart from health care, to the municipalities, came as a bombshell to the opposition in parliament and to the Association of Counties (ACC) (Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2010). The proposal transcended the models suggested by the Commission, and the Commission’s report in practice functioned more as a reason for the decision, a battering ram-tool, than as a basis for the decision

(Mouritzen, 2009). Long before the release of the reform proposal, local debates and soundings with neighbouring municipalities started. Actually, this started soon after the presentation of the report in January, and during the spring it reached a point of no return (Munk Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2008: 144). When preparing the proposal, the government had consulted LGD and its supporting party, the Danish People's Party, to ensure support from these two core actors. LGD was compensated for the loss of mayoral positions by new functions in the municipalities, and the Danish People's Party had their political ambition of abolishing the counties – shared with the governing party of the Conservatives – fulfilled (though replaced by five regions). As the Danish People's Party publicly supported the proposal almost immediately after presentation, the government had a secure parliamentary majority before negotiations even started. Negotiations ran for 1½ months, not least with the Social Democrats who, together with the governing Liberal Party, were holding the majority of mayoral positions at local level. However, a compromise was never reached and the reform finally rested upon a minimal winning coalition consisting of the government parties and the Danish People's Party (Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2010). The reform was semi-voluntary in the sense that the municipalities were given extensive autonomy in deciding with whom to merge, but not whether or not to merge (Munk Christiansen and Klitgaard, 2008: 152–154; Blom-Hansen et al, 2014). The reform agreement gave the old municipalities six months to find amalgamation partners and explicitly stated that if municipalities were not able to meet the minimum size requirement of 20,000

inhabitants, the reform partners in parliament would decide on the amalgamation. Municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants could only avoid amalgamation if they entered into a cooperative arrangement with a large neighbouring municipality. In practice, only five municipalities out of more than 200 with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants succeeded in avoiding amalgamation by making such a cooperative arrangement (Blom-Hansen et al, 2014).

During the process, LGD actively supported the reform idea and the Minister of the Interior continuously acted as policy entrepreneur advocating for the reform both publicly and through intra-party channels to tackle potentially critical Liberal mayors in many small municipalities that were about to be merged. In Denmark, no local state representatives were activated during the reform process. However, a well-reputed former mayor from the opposition party, the Social Democrats, was appointed as mediator by the national government in a few cases where the plans suggested by the local governments did not comply with national guidelines (Blom-Hansen et al, 2014). Instead, the government's organizational resources were activated by making civil servants from politically important ministries with potentially diverging interests core members of the Commission assessing the need for a reform.

At local level, the decision with whom to merge involved a complex mix of economic calculations, partisan considerations, personal ambitions, formal and informal consultations with neighbouring municipalities, along with insecurity as to whether the partner(s) you wanted to marry was willing to marry you – or had an eye

on other partners (Mouritzen, 2010). Due to the parliamentary threat of forced mergers, the decision, however, had to be made, and given the decision complexities, the process was surprisingly harmonious (Mouritzen, 2010). In 2005, the law complex on the reform was decided in parliament and by 1 January 2007, the new local government map was implemented by merging 271 municipalities into 98 new entities and replacing 14 counties with 5 regions. More specifically, 239 municipalities were amalgamated into 66 municipalities, while 32 remained untouched.

Tool use

The main tools used by the government for implementation of the Danish reform are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Governmental reform tools (Denmark)

Tool class	Tool
Nodality	A large commission report. A huge media-covered presentation of the report. Veil of vagueness. Alliance with LGD. Advocating the reform publicly and through intra-party channels
Authority	Minimum size requirement. Credible threat of imposed mergers
Treasure	Compensation with new tasks to municipalities and LGD organizing the municipalities
Organization	Civil servants as core members of the reform-preparing commission

Summing up, ‘nodality’ tools were used extensively by the Danish government. Not at least by a large Commission report, a huge media-covered presentation and alliance building with the supporting party in parliament, and with LGD by consultation and

compensation by new tasks. In addition, a veil of vagueness strategically kept potential reform opponents in the dark.

Strong authority tools were activated and secured by an early political alliance with the government's supporting party. A minimum size requirement of 20,000 inhabitants was set up by the majority in parliament, and the reform partners explicitly stated that they would decide on mergers if the minimum threshold was not met. This proved to be a very effective reform tool.

No financial incentives were activated and 'treasure' tools in general were used modestly. However, a carrot in the form of new tasks reduced opposition from mayors and other local politicians – and ensured active reform support by LGD.

All in all the government made lax use of 'organization' tools. Organization tools were most visible in appointing civil servants as core members of the reform-preparing Commission and by the Minister of the Interior's advocating for the reform through intra-party channels to tackle potentially critical Liberal mayors.

Conclusion

Our point of departure was on the highly variant outcomes of two similar, government-initiated reforms in two similar countries. Whereas the government of Denmark achieved a comprehensive structural reform of its local government system, Norway's government was a lot less successful, in the sense that less than one third of

the local governments in Norway ended up actually merging. To what extent can different use of reform tools explain these different reform outcomes?

The use of ‘treasure’ and ‘organization’ tools comes off as modest and/or lax in both countries, and may not offer significant leverage for explaining the different outcomes. Though neither of the two governments activated strong financial incentives, the Danish government, however, utilized the bifurcated organization of the local government organizations in Denmark and ensured active reform support from LGD by the carrot of new tasks for the municipalities.

We have noted that both governments used ‘nodality’ tools extensively, not least by procurement of preparatory reports. However, whereas the Danish government appointed a commission that doubled as an alliance-building device, securing the support of the LDG, the Norwegian government opted for a fast-working expert commission without any alliance-building potential. In addition, the Danish government when launching the reform idea to a larger degree than the Norwegian government, kept reform opponents in the dark with a veil of vagueness regarding the reform ambitions. Overall, the nodality factor thus appears significant.

We would argue, however, that the key difference in tool use, and a key factor for explaining the different outcomes, lies in the use of ‘authority’ tools. Because the Danish government could credibly state that the minimum threshold of 20,000 inhabitants would, in fact, be enforced, the municipalities clearly perceived that resistance against the reform would be an exercise in futility. Norwegian local

governments, on the other hand, were not similarly incentivized. Although enforced merger was perceived as an actual threat, the political contentiousness surrounding the question of enforced merger, as well as the lack of whole-hearted support from a clear parliamentary majority probably provided licence for unwilling local governments to draw out the process and put their best bet on being able to remain unmerged. As it turned out, these assessments were largely correct, because few unwilling local governments were actually merged.

These observations logically lead to comparing the preconditions for tool use. As for the different use of authority tools, it is notable that the Norwegian government early on decided against setting a minimum population threshold, stating that, 'Distances can be an impediment to mergers (...) the local government reform needs to accommodate Norway's varied geography' (KMD, 2014a: 44). The fact that Norway's territory is about nine times larger than Denmark's, with roughly similar populations, effectively barred the Norwegian government from setting a size-based rule – a pivotal element of the Danish government's highly effective strategy. Intergovernmental mandates tend to be uniform and non-selective (Gormley, 1989: 184), and the absence of a standardized solution can thus be seen as an impediment for the use of authority-based rules. It seems, however, that the Norwegian government's reluctance against using authority-based tools was based on more than just practicality. As noted by Mayntz (1983), authority tools are inappropriate if the aim is to incite voluntary efforts and not just grudging

compliance. The Ministry of Local Governments and Modernization often takes on the role as a staunch defender of local self-rule (KMD, 2008), a stance that would logically induce hesitation over the use of authority tools. As for the county governors, many of them did not want to jeopardize their future working relations with the local governments in their jurisdictions by proposing enforced mergers (Glomsrud, 2017).

Salamon (2002: 607–608) has emphasized the importance of ‘enablement skills’ related to tool use. The relative inexperience of Norway’s government at the time of reform initiation may to some extent explain reform strategies that in hindsight seem to have impeded effective reform implementation, such as the failure to secure allegiance from KS and other key actors, as well as the reluctance against providing the county governors with a more specific mandate. However, the overarching explanation is certainly that the Norwegian government’s parliamentary position was a lot weaker than that of their Danish counterparts. Solberg’s government was a minority government that relied on the support of two smaller parties, one of which became an increasingly vocal opponent of enforced mergers as the reform progressed (Klausen et al, 2019). Denmark’s government, on the other hand, had a strong parliamentary position and, though a minority government, had a multi-year record of political agreements with its supporting party. In addition, an experienced minister of the interior with a well-established image as a political entrepreneur led the reform process and actively supported the reform both publicly

and through intra-party channels. The Danish government also took advantage of the bifurcated organization of the local government organizations and succeeded in playing the two organizations off against each other by ‘bribing’ one organization with tasks from the other organization’s domain. Departing from its stronger parliamentary position, the experienced Danish government, to a larger extent than the less experienced Norwegian government, by a combination of policy tools, seem to have alleviated the potential dilemma between effectiveness and political support (Salamon, 2002) by simultaneously building support in parliament, as well as from the organizations of the municipalities that were facing merger.

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¹ Territorial Divisions Act (*Inndelingslova*) of 2001.

² kommunereform.no [Accessed 2020-07-06]

³ nykommune.no [Accessed 2020-07-06]

⁴ The County Governors are multi-purpose state territorial representatives appointed by the government, tasked mainly with supervisory functions.

⁵ These 11 enforced proposals were decided by a majority of 86–83 or even 85–84 (decision on item 1, 8.6.2017). The other merger proposals were decided unanimously. See <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2016-2017/refs-201617-06-08?m=16> [Accessed 12 January 2021].