

Local self-government in northern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries

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The first communal laws

The early 19th century was a period of liberalisation and communal reforms across Europe. There was a renaissance for the idea of the city as a political community. New local administrative units with varying degree of autonomy were set up. The reform process seems to have started in France immediately after the Revolution, when the municipality in 1790, and once again in 1801, was established as the basic local administrative unit. Prussia introduced in 1808 a law that guaranteed urban self-government. Several other German states followed soon the same course as well as the Netherlands in 1824. A lot of local reforms were issued the 1830s. Great Britain for example launched in 1835 the Municipal Corporations Act. France revised their regulations in 1831 and the Netherlands in 1836. Several Swiss cantons were in addition assured local self-government in the 1830s. Most well known is perhaps the Belgian communal law from 1836, which is considered as the first European law of its kind.¹

This trend of liberalisation and communal reforms is also visible in northern Europe. New regulations were first introduced in Denmark and Norway, and later on in Sweden, Finland and Iceland. Most famous is the Norwegian law – *formanskopsloven* – from 1837, with its very wide-ranging margins for local initiatives. This was mainly a law for rural Norway, and did not mean any radical changes for the towns. Older urban institutions were re-named but continued more or less to function in the same way as previous. Denmark made as well a minor revision of the urban administration in 1837, but more fundamental was the law of 1841 with quite new regulations for the rural municipalities.

In Sweden the first communal ordinances were issued in 1862 and upgraded to laws in 1866 as a consequence of the Parliamentary reform of the same year. The urban-rural distinction was important even in Sweden, and there was one law for towns and another one for rural municipalities. Besides, Stockholm got a separate regulation, like the other Nordic capital cities. Specific for Sweden was the possibility to organise municipal communities (*municipalsamhällen*). These sites were a kind of partly self-governed urban neighbourhoods inside the ordinary rural municipalities. It was a special regulation for urban places not privileged as towns or boroughs but with town like requirements concerning town planning, building regulations, fire protection and health care.

The Finnish communal laws of 1865 (rural municipalities) and 1875 (urban municipalities) resembled in many ways the Swedish legislation.² Iceland had to wait to 1872 until the first communal law was enacted, which has been described as an important step towards democracy.³

¹ Mats Andrén, *Den europeiska blicken och det lokala självstyrets värden* (Hedemora 2007), p. 20.

² Päiviö Tommilla (red.), *Stadsväsendets historia i Finland* (Vanda 1987).

³ Gunnar Karlsson, *Iceland's 1100 years: History of a marginal society* (London 2005), p. 264.

Two Nordic models for local governance

Finland and Sweden was one nation up to 1809 and has a long common history of local self-governing going back at least to the Middle Ages. The basic units for local administration was the towns and on the countryside the parishes. The burghers met in the town hall to discuss and decide on their common affairs. The magistrate and the mayor answered for jurisdiction and administration, and represented the city as well as the State. They were responsible for implementing state regulations in the towns and should at the same moment defend the town's interest towards the State. No clear separation existed yet between local matters and the issues of the State. On the countryside responsible persons, mainly peasants, came together at the parish meetings, compulsory headed by the priest, for handling a mix of ecclesiastical and secular local affairs. Poor relief, elementary school and health care were at least to some extent secular issues that belonged to the domain of the parish.

The Swedish parish duties were updated by the municipal ordinances of 1817 and 1843. Gradually ecclesiastical matters were separated from secular business. In 1843 a parish board was introduced with an elected chairman, and not compulsory the priest. The right to impose local taxes were extended already in 1817. The parish remained the basic unit for rural local self-government even after the new communal laws of 1866 (1862). A clearer distinction was now made between ecclesiastical and secular matters. The concept of municipality (*kommun*) was introduced with a new organisation for handling the secular affairs. The municipalities got at the same moment extended responsibilities and the rules for local taxation became uniform. The chairman was elected by a parish council or by a municipal meeting.⁴

The initial development of local self-government followed another route in Denmark and Norway than in Sweden and Finland. The Danish State used State officials and set up special State commissions for administering for example poor relief, elementary teaching and other dealings, which in Sweden-Finland were considered as duties for the parishes. The magistrate was normally allowed to have one representative in each of these commissions. The parishes had a rather marginal role in Denmark compared to Sweden-Finland. The village and the estate were in Denmark more important than the parish.⁵

The Danish commission system survived the 1837 reform of urban administration, but was dissolved on the countryside by the communal reform of 1841. A type of parish councils – *sognforstandskaper* – replaced the old rural commissions. These councils consisted of partly elected representatives from the parish and partly council members by virtue of their offices, and the councils got the right to elect their own chairman. The communal law of 1867, which was restricted to the countryside, introduced a new, and more democratic, type of parish council – *sognråd* – that got full sovereignty for what was considered as municipal affairs.

The Danish commission system was dissolved in 1868 even for the towns, and the town council – *byrådet* – became responsible for all municipal matters. Denmark had now got full communal self-government in a more modern sense. The definition of issues belonging to local authorities was at the same moment widened. The mayor was still appointed by the King, and the mayor was automatically, up to 1919, appointed to chairman of the town council. The other members of the town council were elected representatives for the town. In

⁴ The Swedish development is described for example by Lars Nilsson, "Kommunernas plats: Indelningsreformer i historiskt perspektiv", Peter Aronsson et. al. (red.), *Storkommunreformen 1952: Striden om folkhemmets geografi* (Stockholm 2002).

⁵ For an overview of the early Nordic municipal development see Harald Gustafsson, *Kommunal frihet för nationell samling: Debatter om kommunalreformer i 1800-talets Norden* (Stockholm 1987).

1860, the so-called two-class system was introduced for the urban local elections, which guaranteed power and influence for people with high incomes and property. The two-class system meant that all grown-up men designated the larger part of the city council, and the 20 per cent of the inhabitants who paid the highest taxes nominated the smaller part. Rich male taxpayers could, therefore, elect members to both parts of the council. This system for local elections had already been practised on the countryside since 1855. On the countryside, however, the highest taxpayers elected the larger part of the representatives, and all grown-up men elected the smaller part. The two-class system was abolished in 1908 and at the same moment both men and women got universal suffrage.⁶

The national commission system for handling local affairs was important in Norway too in the early 19th century, and did not totally disappear with the communal law of 1837. The new law divided the local authorities into two sections – *formenskap* and *representantforsamling* – separately elected by a small minority of the people. The local voting rules were the same as for the Parliament. Only the richest property owners, burghers and dignitary officials had the right to vote. It has been estimated that about six per cent of the total population, or one third of the male population over 25 years of age, were qualified to participate in the elections. New rules followed in 1884 when even people with a certain level of income got the right to vote. More fundamental was the 1896 reform, which in principle gave universal suffrage to all men over 25 years of age. A new law guaranteed the principle of universal suffrage for men in 1901, and simultaneously all women with a certain income got the right to vote and to be elected as council members. In 1910 universal suffrage was established for Norwegian women.

The magistrate, consisting of state officials appointed by the King, was still after 1837, responsible for the city administration. This link between the State and the local authorities were later on seen as undemocratic and as a restriction on the local self-government. It was therefore questioned and lively debated by the turn of the century. A reform proposal from 1909 recommended that a locally appointed councillor should replace the magistrate. The proposition was not met with any great enthusiasm by city authorities and therefore initially rejected. The debate continued however and a solution was reached in 1917. The magistrate was then abolished and later on (not immediately) the towns got their own local councillors.⁷

We can, thus, identify two fundamental different ways of organising local administration in northern Europe in the early 19th century. In Denmark and Norway the State answered to a great extent even for the administration of local affairs through national commissions and state officials. In Sweden-Finland on the other hand, the parishes and the towns had to take care of and be responsible for what was defined as local matters. Burghers and farmers in Sweden-Finland had also much more direct influence on the local council through the municipal meetings on the countryside, and the burgher meetings in the Town Hall. Denmark-Norway practised a more indirect system with partly elected representatives and partly

⁶ Harry Christensen, "Den danske lokaladministrations overgangsformer fra enevælde til folkestyre", Ingrid Hammarström & Lars Nilsson (red.), *Lokal praksis på det sociala området i de nordiska länderna 1800-1920* (Stockholm 1986).

⁷ Rolf Danielsen, "Kommunaliseringsprosessen i norske byer 1880-1920"; Edgar Hovland, "Fra bygdekommisjon til kommunestyre: Trekk av lokalstyret i norske bygder på 1800-talet"; Both in Ingrid Hammarström & Lars Nilsson (red.), *Lokal praksis på det sociala området i de nordiska länderna 1800-1920* (Stockholm 1986). Yngve Flo, *Staten och sjølvstyret: Ideologier og strategier knytt till det lokale og regionale styringsverket etter 1900* (Bergen 2004), ch. 3 and 4. Jan Eivind Myhre, "Den explosive byutviklingen 1830-1920", Knut Helle et. al. *Norsk byhistorie: Urbaniseringen gjennom 1300 år* (Oslo 2006), ch. 15.

council members by virtue of their offices. Iceland followed to a great extent the Danish-Norwegian model, not surprisingly because Iceland was a part of Denmark up to 1944.

By the early 1870s all Nordic countries, inclusive Iceland, had modernised their local administration and government, in accordance with the standard of that time. The city councils were made up of locally elected representatives. Only men could for a long time be elected as members of the councils, and the voting was graded in a way to secure stability and ensure the municipal power to property owners and people with high incomes. Different voting scales were used in each nation.

The Swedish voting system, based on income and property, may have been the most conservative one. According to the original ordinances of 1862 there was no restrictions at all on the number of votes a single person or a company could have. But already in 1866 the maximum number of votes was prescribed to 100. Most people had no votes at all. Only about five to six per cent of the total population in the largest towns were entitled to vote in the 1870s and 1880s⁸. The Swedish municipalities of the late 19th century have been considered to resemble a private joint-stock company. Universal suffrage for men and women in local elections was in Sweden established in 1919, and two years later even for the Parliamentary elections. Finland got universal suffrage to local elections for both men and women in 1917, and to the national Parliament in 1907. But already in 1875 unmarried Finnish women of age had the right to vote in local elections. Thus, Sweden was the last Nordic country to admit universal suffrage for both sexes.

The development of local autonomy

An issue of great concern has been the relationship between the State and the local communities. The reforms of the early 19th century were a victory for the liberal idea of local autonomy. Against this liberal vision stood the conservative idea of the unquestionable supremacy of the State. The result of the reform process became anyhow that a number of public duties previously considered as businesses of the State were delegated to local authorities. The political system was of course not yet democratic in a modern sense. It was still the elite of the burghers who was guaranteed the political power in the cities and towns.

The first stage of the communal reform process meant thus a transfer of resources and power from the State to the local authorities. The new city authorities often defined their first obligations to be investments in the physical infrastructures. Such investments could include for example municipal pipe-bound water systems, street cleaning, sewage systems, gas works, public buildings, harbours and city planning. Welfare measures such as poor relief, health care, old-age provisions, and public schools were not initially considered as issues of uppermost concern for the urban authorities.

In the Nordic context Norwegian and Danish cities have been seen as pioneers when it comes to the introduction of more progressive social policies. During the first decades of the 20th century Danish cities governed by Social Democrats accomplished far-reaching reforms of elementary schooling, health care, social support and housing conditions. These local measures preceded the forthcoming building of the Danish welfare state after 1945. They can be seen as a form of municipal socialism, defined as socialism in the local setting but not

⁸ Bo Öhngren, "Urbaniseringen i Sverige 1840-1920", Grethe Authén Blom (red.), *Urbaniseringsprosessen i Norden, del 3* (Oslo-Bergen-Tromsø 1977), p. 330.

nationally. The comparatively more generous Danish voting rules for grown-up men, since 1860 in the cities within the restrictions of the two-class system, may have paved the way for radical local regimes and extensive social reforms.⁹

The Norwegian cities as well experienced a period of strong economic and social expansion up to the 1920s. Progressive social policies made a breakthrough in the larger cities already in the 1890s. Municipal housing, reforms of poor relief, improved public schooling, municipal labour exchange, and eight-hour working day for municipal employees were some of the new measures. Both in Trondheim and Bergen local welfare programmes were presented before the local elections in 1894 and 1896.¹⁰ Power and resources were successively transferred from the State to the local authorities, and the margins for local initiatives were still very far-reaching in Norway. Denmark had at this point in time a more elaborated control system with less freedom for local self-government.

Urban municipal expenses increased in Norway almost five times from 1885 up to the First World War¹¹. Initially, the expansion may have been facilitated by the fact that the municipalities had monopoly on income taxes up to 1892. The State had to rely on indirect taxes, foremost customs. The voting reforms at the turn of the century – universal suffrage for men in 1901 at the latest – together with an active organisation of labourers created good conditions for the development of municipal socialism in Norway as well as in Denmark.¹²

The municipal expansion came to a halt in Norway during the 1920s due to the financial crisis. The State had to intervene and support municipalities with extensive debts and severe economic problems. The state measures meant in reality less local autonomy.¹³ In Denmark, on the other hand, the municipal expansion could continue in the 1920s, and the local autonomy was at the same moment allowed to increase. Due to scarce administrative resources the Danish state had to give up their earlier strict control of the municipalities.¹⁴

Even if Norway and Denmark were forerunners when it comes to progressive social policies through their municipal socialism, Sweden is later on generally seen as leading in introducing welfare policies. In Denmark the mentality from the old 19th century commission system seem to have survived in that sense that the national authorities even in the 1960s did not hesitate to use central institutions for welfare administration instead of relying on the municipalities¹⁵.

Cautiousness with public money has been an ideal for Swedish local authorities, and the rise in urban municipal spending was lower in Sweden than in Norway during the period 1885-1913/1914. The Norwegian cities spent about one third of all their municipal expenses on public schools and poor relief in 1913/1914. The equivalent Swedish figure was less than 20 per cent. Instead, the Swedish city authorities favoured investments in the physical infrastructure that amounted to 44 per cent in Sweden compared to one third in Norway.¹⁶ The

⁹ Yngve Flo 2004, pp. 69f.

¹⁰ Rolf Danielsen 1986, p. 49.

¹¹ Jan Eivind Myhre in Knut Helle et.al. 2006, p. 326.

¹² Yngve Flo 2004, pp. 67-71.

¹³ Rolf Danielsen 1986, p.50. Yngve Flo 2004, ch. 5.

¹⁴ Per Boje et. al., *Folkestyre i by og land: Danske kommuner gennem 150 år* (Herning 1991), pp. 104ff.

¹⁵ Klaus Majgaard, "Fra velfærdsteknokrat til partnerskabsagent", *Hvorhen Danmark? Perspektiver på kommunalreformen* (Fredriksberg 2004), p. 109.

¹⁶ The Norwegian figures are from Jan Eivind Myhre in Knut Helle et. al. 2006, p. 326. Swedish figures come from *Bidrag till Sveriges officiella statistik: Kommunernas finanser och fattigvård*.

percentage Finnish cities spent on public schools and poor relief was in the early 1910s almost the same as for Sweden.¹⁷

These shares illustrate that social policies generally were given relatively low priority by Swedish as well as Finnish city authorities. The Swedish voting reforms at the end of the 1910s did not result in any dramatic political changes. When Social Democrats came to power, they continued the cautious strategy and allowed often conservatives to keep their former leading positions in the city governments. Municipal socialism was not seen as the best way forward. The municipalities were instead imagined as an obstacle for progressive social measures. A communal reform was perceived as necessary for realising the welfare ambitions.

The question of local autonomy is a tricky one. Previous research does not give any definite answers. Traits of increased as well as of decreased local freedom can be found. The Swedish towns are for example supposed to have become less dependent of the State in the period 1875-1900. Increasing urban growth demanded at that point of time measures within fields, primarily the physical infrastructure, that were more or less unregulated by the State. Therefore, the local freedom of action was rather extensive and increasing.¹⁸ Gradually, in the 20th century more detailed and tighter national legislation was brought in to regulate and control a number of vital local concerns, not least in the field of social policies. At the same moment the towns as well as the rural municipalities became financially more and more dependent on state subsidises often attached with special conditions. Consequently, the period 1900-1930 is for Sweden supposed to have witnessed reduced urban autonomy.¹⁹

The growing State dependency resulted soon in a redefinition of local autonomy. Local self-governing was, especially among the Swedish Social Democrats, perceived as local implementation and administration of central commissions.²⁰ The Norwegian Labour Party replaced at the same time the former idea of municipal socialism with a municipal management philosophy.²¹ These redefinitions meant that the municipality should be more strongly integrated with the State, but anyway maintain a high level of local freedom of action. The building of the local welfare state could thereafter begin. Many scholars emphasise that the welfare era (c. 1930 – c. 1970) in many aspects meant less sovereignty for the Swedish municipalities.²² Service delivery values were underlined, and less attention was given to the citizens' local political participation as well as issues of local identities.²³ The municipal service level should in principle be the same all over the country.

In the 1980s a new interest for questions of local autonomy was visible across Europe, and in 1985 the European Council approved a convention of local self-governance. Efficiency, citizenship and legitimacy were important key words in that context. The new convention, which came into force in 1988, reflects important changes in the perception of democracy and political participation that had been going on since the early 1970s. Municipalities should not

¹⁷ Päiviö Tommilla (red.), *Stadsväsendets historia i Finland* (Vanda 1987) p. 442.

¹⁸ Rune Bokholm, *Städernas handlingsfrihet: En studie av expansionskedet 1900-1930* (Lund 1995), p. 115.

¹⁹ Rune Bokholm 1995, p. 290ff.

²⁰ Ulla Ekström von Essen, *Folkhemmets kommun: Socialdemokratiska idéer om lokalsamhället 1939-1952* (Stockholm 2003).

²¹ Yngve Flo 2004, ch. 9.

²² See for example Mats Dahlkvist & Urban Strandberg, "Kommunal självstyrelse som maktspridningsprojekt?", *Maktutredningen: Demokratiutredningens forskarvolym, SOU 1999:76* (Stockholm 1999). Ingvar Hjelmqvist, *Relationer mellan stat och kommun* (Stockholm 1994).

²³ Urban Strandberg, *Debatten om kommunala självstyrelsen 1962-1994* (Göteborg 1998), pp. 370ff.

only be effective deliverers of welfare services, but also favour political citizenship and develop community democracy. Increased local autonomy was seen as a way to strengthen the legitimacy of political decisions and deepen democracy even national. A new and stronger ideal of political participation was under discussion. Enlarged local self-governing was supposed to shorten the distance between the people and the political authorities. Primarily, the politicians should represent the citizens and not the various political fields. In a perfect world citizen democracy, service democracy and community democracy should be maximised simultaneously.²⁴

Parallel to this ideological development the main duties for Swedish (and Nordic) municipalities gradually changed. The welfare epoch was in some sense over and environmental issues followed by climate changes turned up as new and very urgent problems. A new stage of municipal development began with sustainable development as a key word. In this new phase, local autonomy may at least in Sweden have increased somewhat. The municipal legislation became for example in certain areas less tight than previously, and for the first time more indications have been found of increased than reduced local autonomy. On the other hand, there were also signs of more regulations, and stricter State control.²⁵ Even for Denmark signs of more local freedom in the 1990s has been noted.²⁶ In Norway the municipal management ideal from the welfare period was challenged by an executive strategy, which implied less local autonomy.²⁷ Thus, there are tendencies in various directions and no definite pattern can yet be observed.

In the long-term perspective we can identify three main periods of municipal development in the Nordic countries. A first period began in the second half of the 19th century with focus on the building of physical infrastructure, and with features of municipal socialism in Norway and Denmark. Investments in the physical infrastructure have of course continued all the time, and were from around 1930 complemented by a more systematic and intense building of social infrastructure, the local welfare state. That constitutes the start of the second phase. New obligations, and not least the environmental issues, turned up in the third period starting around 1970. The prime goal became to build ecological or sustainable infrastructure. If we want to use colours to illustrate the three phases we can talk of a blue, a red and a green period. Local autonomy seems to have increased at least during the start of the blue phase, and especially when the new communal laws were enacted. The red period has on the other hand been perceived as a time with more State control and reduced local self-governing. In the beginning of the green period we may be back in a situation with growing local autonomy, but there are also tendencies in opposite directions.

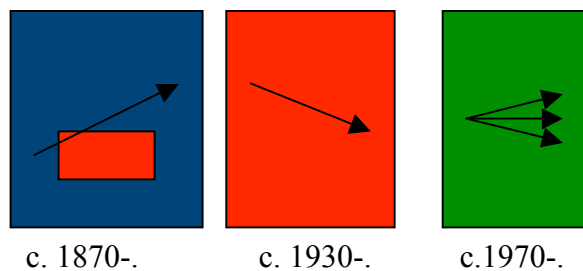
²⁴ Mats Andrén 2007, p. 113, 138. John Mukka, "Kommuner i Norden: en komparativ studie", Examensarbete Luleå tekniska universitet 2004, p. 8-9.

²⁵ Ingvar Hjelmqvist 1994, p. 272ff.

²⁶ John Mukka 2004, p. 18.

²⁷ Yngve Flo 2004, ch. 12.

The development of local autonomy can briefly be sketched in the following way:



Blue/red = the building of physical infrastructure with elements of municipal socialism (Norway and Denmark)

Red = the building of the welfare society

Green = the building of sustainability

—▶ = Tendency for development of local autonomy

One Nordic model

Nowadays, we can identify six different municipal systems in Europe. One of them is the North-European system including Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.²⁸ The Nordic countries are among else characterised by geographically rather wide and therefore also rather few municipalities. Denmark for example has only 98 municipalities left after the communal reform of 2007. The number of Swedish municipalities has since 1952 stepwise been reduced from over 2,000 to 290. The municipalities belonging to the North-European system is considered to have a great deal of self-governance, which (except for Norway) is protected by the constitutions. The autonomy is also supposed to be guaranteed by the local authorities right to charge municipal taxes. These taxes can be rather high and have to a great extent been used for financing the welfare policies. The governments of the four Nordic countries made namely at an early stage the local authorities responsible for accomplishing the national welfare programmes. The Nordic strategy has been to build the Welfare State from bottom up. Therefore, the municipalities represent a major part of the public finances. The State has at the same moment developed a system for controlling the municipalities, and this control need has been rather extensive.

Great Britain and Ireland represent another type of local governance, known as the British municipal system. As in Northern Europe the municipalities of the British system are relatively wide in geographical terms, and they have a high number of inhabitants. The British local authorities have rather limited responsibilities for welfare measures. Besides, their local autonomy is restricted and not guaranteed by the constitution.²⁹

Germany, Austria and Swiss constitute a third system, labelled the Central European municipal system. All three are federative states often with far-reaching local autonomy, and to some extent even direct democracy. Each regional parliament has the authority to regulate its own local responsibilities. The number of inhabitants can be rather low. In the Alps for example there are municipalities with less than 100 inhabitants. In the former West Germany

²⁸ Anders Lidström, *Kommunsystem i Europa* (Malmö 2003), p. 16.

²⁹ Anders Lidström 2003, pp. 16f, 52ff. Andreas Bågenholm & Marie Demker, *Styrelseskick i elva länder* (Malmö 2007), pp. 94f. Jürgen Elvert, "Das politischen System Irlands", Wolfgang Ismayr (ed.), *Die politischen Systeme Westeuropas* (Wiesbaden 2004), pp. 293. Roland Sturm, "Das politische System Grossbritanniens", in Wolfgang Ismayr (ed.) 2004, pp. 254f.

extensive communal reforms were accomplished in the 1960s and 1970s, which reduced the number of municipalities considerably.³⁰

Most nations in western and southern Europe – France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxemburg, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Greece – belong, however, to the Napoleonic municipal system. These nations have a strong central power, and detailed regulations of the municipalities. Besides, there are often three administrative levels below the State level, and not two (or one) as in for example the North-European system. Thus, the State, the regions, the provinces or departments, and the municipalities make up the four administrative levels in France.³¹ In Scandinavia, with its strong municipalities, the county parliaments have since long ago constituted the only level between the State and the municipalities, but with comparatively limited duties. In Finland there has not been any secondary level with elected parliaments at all, the municipalities have instead been urged to cooperate on common affairs.³²

The municipalities of the Napoleonic system are often very small units with a mayor and a strong local identity. France had more than 36,000 municipalities at the end of the 20th century, and 4,000 of them had less than 100 inhabitants, and some municipalities had no population at all. Italy had at the same time over 8,000 municipalities. The mayor is a person of central importance in the Napoleonic model. French municipalities with zero inhabitants have for example nevertheless a mayor appointed. A reform process of the Napoleonic system has been going on during last decades. The restructuring has been most intense in the Netherlands, which has developed a municipal system more resembling the North-European model and to some extent even the Central European model.³³

Northern Europe has as well continuously implemented new ideas of local and regional governance. Denmark for example has rather recently replaced the former 24 counties (*amt*) by 5 regions. In Sweden a similar process has started but is still under discussion and not yet accomplished all over the country. Anyhow, a regional parliament with stronger autonomy than the county parliament has during last decades been seen as the most appropriate way forward. Revisions of the communal and regional structure have as well been going on in Finland and Norway.³⁴

In Eastern Europe a restructuring of the municipal organisation began after the fall of the Soviet Union. The reform process started in Poland, Hungary and all the other east European nations that had been allied to the Soviet Union. Together these states represent the East European municipal model, which still is in construction. The last model is the Post-soviet municipal system including Russia and the former Soviet republics of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldavia, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Their municipal reorganisation has started even later than in the rest of Eastern Europe.³⁵

³⁰ Anders Lidström 2003, p. 17. Wolfgang Ismayr, "Das politischen System Deutschlands", in Wolfgang Ismayr (ed.) 2004, p. 479. Wolf Linder, "Das politische System der Schweiz" in Wolfgang Ismayr (ed.) 2004, p. 511f.

³¹ Anders Lidström 2003, p. 18. Andreas Bågenholm & Marie Demker 2007, pp. 112f. Udo Kempf, "Das politische System Frankreichs" in Wolfgang Ismayr (ed.) 2004, pp. 340ff.

³² Päiviö Tommilla (red.) 1987, p 363. John Mukka 2004, pp 32ff.

³³ Anders Lidström 2003, p. 18. Norbert Lepszy, "Das politische System der Niederlande" in Wolfgang Ismayr (ed.) 2004, p. 381f.

³⁴ Yngve Flo 2004, ch. 12. John Mukka 2004, pp. 17 ff. Ola Svein Stugu, Mot et urbanisert land? 1920-2000, Knut Helle et. al. *Norsk byhistorie: Urbaniseringen gjennom 1300 år* (Oslo 206), pp. 437ff.

³⁵ Anders Lidström 2003, pp 18f.

The concept of municipality may be used worldwide but the content of the term municipality varies quite a lot, as we just have seen. The municipal duties are for example dependent on the total set up of administrative levels. Nations with few levels below the State, like the Nordic countries, can develop a high degree of local autonomy. Even in federative states municipalities may get extensive responsibilities and self-government. But few levels below the State may also result in a concentration of power and resources to the State with local state commissions as responsible for local matters. Nations with several levels between the State and the municipality have often a rather low degree of local autonomy. Instead regional councils can be responsible for obligations that in another system may belong to the municipalities. That is one reason why trans-national comparative studies of municipal development and local public spending must be done with great care.

Concluding remarks

The four Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden – started their communal reform processes in the 19th century from very different positions. Denmark and Norway had a tradition of state commissions for handling local affairs, while Sweden and Finland since long ago had developed a system of local self-governing based on towns and parishes. The introduction of communal laws seems generally to have resulted in increased local autonomy. Later on periods of increased and reduced local autonomy have succeeded each other. The period up to c. the 1920s and the 1930s with the building of physical infrastructure as the main issue for Nordic towns, and combined with municipal socialism in Norway and Denmark, may have resulted in increased local freedom of action. During the welfare era (c. 1930 up to c. 1970) the trend appears to have been the opposite, i.e. decreasing local autonomy. The municipalities had primarily to accomplish national decisions on welfare policies. By the end of the 20th century signs of enlarged as well as reduced local autonomy have been noted. During this process of municipal development the previous discrepancies between two various Nordic systems appears to gradually have been eliminated. Thus, political scientists of today talk about the North-European municipal system.

There may be good reasons to let the Nordic countries represent one system in a comparative European perspective. But we must also be aware of that there are significant variations between the Nordic countries. Besides, rural municipalities have not always followed the same route as cities and towns, and the capital cities were previously regulated separately. The national differences and the urban-rural variations may sometimes be as interesting as the similarities. Anyhow, the variations between the Nordic nations may over time have become less than the variations between the diverse European municipal systems.