



Why Local Governments Support Increased Centralization: An Analysis of Norwegian and Swedish Central–Local Governance of Immigration Integration

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Abstract


Local autonomy is a highly valued and promoted feature of European governance, but why do local governments sometimes support increased centralization, which infringe their local autonomy? An intuitive assumption is that local governments would oppose policy changes that infringed their autonomy vis-à-vis the central government. However, this article explores an opposing hypothesis outlining a rationale for why local governments may either oppose or support increased central steering. The study includes analyses of 190 municipal consultation responses from five policy processes in Norway and Sweden regulating central–local governance of the immigrant integration field. The empirical analysis reveals that at least some – and often most – municipalities supported policy proposals that would increase central governance of the integration field. Some municipalities supported increased centralization because they would benefit from it if higher levels of government are made legally accountable for specific aspects of the service provision or if responsibilities between municipalities were redistributed. Additionally, principles of equal service provision across municipalities and refugees' legal safeguards were actively voiced. In the conclusion, I discuss a dilemma for the broader central–local governance literature: how should we analytically assess and classify policy changes that involve increased central governance if such changes are supported by local governments themselves?

Keywords:

local autonomy;
central-local governance;
immigrant integration;
refugee settlement;
integration programs

Practical Relevance

- The article provides insights into how different rationales may make municipalities inclined to either support or oppose increased centralization, which is highly relevant for policymakers in future policy processes regarding centralization.
- The article exemplifies why municipal support for increased centralization may be motivated by municipalities' self-interest, e.g., either by (re)distributing responsibilities within the municipal community or by making higher levels of government legally accountable.
- The article provides a deeper understanding for why Norway and Sweden have developed different refugee settlement models.

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Introduction

Why do local governments support increased centralization, which may infringe their local autonomy? Local autonomy is a highly valued and promoted feature of European governance (Ladner et al. 2016), and decentralization has gained popularity in both scholarship and policy circles, along with world-wide trends of decentralization initiatives (Hutchcroft 2001). The field of immigrant integration is no exception, where local governance in the integration field has been promoted by politicians, EU institutions and integration scholars (Gebhardt 2016). In the integration literature, increased centralization is often criticized (Hernes 2021), and local autonomy is presented as a solution to ensure a holistic integration process in response to concrete problems (Scholten, Collett and Petrovic 2017; Jørgensen 2012; Dekker, Emilsson et al. 2015; Gebhardt 2016).

However, although it may sound counterintuitive at first glance, local governments themselves may not always prefer a high degree of local autonomy. In this article, using the integration field as a case, I investigate why local governments may support increased centralization. To explore this question, I conduct a comparative policy analysis of Norwegian and Swedish integration policies that specifically address central–local governance issues from 2010 to 2021. In studies of multi-level governance in the integration field, Zapata-Barrero et al. (2017) call for more theoretically relevant cases. Both Norway and Sweden are classified as countries where local autonomy has a particularly strong standing (Sellers and Lidström 2007), making them least likely cases for increased centralization. However, within the ‘Nordic family’ of managerial and institutional design, Sweden belongs to the East Nordic model characterized by having higher degree of institutional autonomy, while Norway belongs to the West Nordic model with more political steering (Öberg and Wockelberg 2016), which could also influence central–local dynamics. Thus, these two countries constitute particularly relevant cases to examine if and why municipalities may support increased centralization.

I start with a review of how central–local governance relations have been studied so far in the integration literature to highlight the research gap I address to fill. Building on the broader central–local governance literature, I present two opposing hypotheses for why municipalities may or may not support increased centralization. I continue with a presentation of the empirical data: a total of 190 municipal consultation responses from five different policy processes in Norway and Sweden from 2010 to 2021. In the empirical analysis, I examine whether or not recent changes in central–local governance in Norway and Sweden after 2010 were supported by the municipal community and synthesize the arguments the different municipalities used when justifying their position. In the conclusion, I discuss an analytical dilemma in the central–local literature by assessing a country’s degree of local autonomy (e.g., through indices): how to assess policy changes that involve increased central steering if such changes are actively supported by local governments themselves?

Central–Local Governance in the Integration Literature

The study of national integration *policies* dominated the integration literature in its initial years, while the *governance* of integration drew less attention. From early 2000, however, the multi-level governance of integration policies received increased academic attention, including the central–local dimension. The exiting integration research has included different approaches to studying central–local governance. One strain of literature analyzes whether and how local governments – and particularly large cities – develop their own integration policies. Such studies show that local governments are not merely implementers of national integration policies, but increasingly formulate their own integration policies, which may diverge from the national integration policies and narratives of immigration and integration (Dekker et al. 2015: 2; Jørgensen 2014; Emilsson 2016; Penninx et al. 2017; Alexander 2003; Jørgensen 2012). A second strain of literature explores how local governments utilize the autonomy they have within national frameworks when implementing integration policies, focusing on e.g. implementation of policy tools such as meta-governance and network formation (Qvist 2016, 2017), cross-sector collaboration (Zapata and Compos 2023) and social procurement (Ek Österberg & Zapata 2023), and how local caseworkers negotiate tensions in national policies trying to combine aims of

employment and economic self-sufficiency, and social inclusion and participation in a wider sense (Hagelund & Kavli 2011). The third approach is the integration mainstreaming literature, which includes descriptive analyses of whether or not countries have a state-centric (centralized) or poly-centric (decentralized) governance structure of the integration field (Scholten and van Breugel 2018; Scholten et al. 2017). These studies identify whether or not local governments have responsibilities for developing and implementing integration policies. The fourth approach goes one step further and analyses in depth *how* central governments regulate the leeway local governments have 1) to develop their own integration policies and 2) in their role as implementers of national policies. Emilsson (2015) studies how central governments can exercise power over local governments by examining how they use different instruments (coercive, remunerative, and normative) in their national integration policies to regulate the local leeway. Gebhardt (2016) takes a similar approach and shows how state-led civic integration programs across Europe may challenge and narrow the role of local governments in the integration process. Summarized, the constantly growing integration literature tackling central-local governance issues contributes with analysis of distribution of responsibilities for integration and different modes of national steering, and how local governments execute their autonomy within these national frameworks.

Lastly, many country and comparative studies that examine the policy development in the integration field sometimes also mention municipal views on policy proposals regulating central-local governance (Brochmann et al. 2010; Hernes 2017, 2021; Borevi & Bengtson 2015). However, there are no studies that investigate specifically how municipalities evaluate proposals of increased centralization, and their rationale for supporting or opposing such changes, a research gap this article seeks to address. Such knowledge is particularly relevant because the integration literature often portrays local autonomy as a mainly positive feature (Hernes 2021), which makes it important to broaden our understanding of the complexity and the dilemmas of the central-local governance questions from the perspective of the local level. This could be done by building on the broader central-local governance literature to develop theoretical hypotheses of why local governments may support or oppose policy proposals of increased centralization.

The Central-Local Governance Dilemma: Opposing Values Favoring Central Steering and Local Autonomy

The central-local governance literature has provided important contributions on how to conceptualize and measure central-local relations. A large body of literature has dominantly focused on the constitutional and financial frameworks for local government, and on the different functions for which the latter are responsible (Hutchcroft 2001; Kjellberg 1995; Sellers and Lidström 2007; Pierre 1990; Goldsmith and Page 2010). But constitutional frameworks provide only a partial picture of local autonomy, and some scholars have argued that we also need to look beyond constitutional and financial frameworks and include more indirect control exercised through the regulation of policies, for example through policy instruments directed at local government (Fleurke and Willemse 2006; Goodman 2002). Further, as many studies concentrate on how to conceptualize and measure central-local local autonomy, there is a call for more studies with an ambition to explain why we may see cases and trends of decentralization or centralization (Blom-Hansen 1999; Ladner, et al. 2016), where municipal support or opposition may be one relevant factor.

Although decentralization has been dominantly promoted as a desired and popular feature (Hutchcroft 2001), central-local governance involves an inherent dilemma balancing different considerations. A paradox of central-local government relations is if the central government decentralizes politically important public services, the more it may be tempted to control local governments in their role as implementers of national policies (Haveri 2015). Kröger (2011, 150) calls this “the quarrelsome relatives’ paradox, where opposing values of local autonomy and central control are in conflict. Existing literature includes thorough discussions on the general dilemmas in central-local governance which expose justifications for both local autonomy *and* central steering (Hernes 2021; Kjellberg 1995; Ladner et al. 2019), which

function as a good point of departure to develop hypotheses for why local governments may oppose or support proposals of increased centralization.

Municipal support for and opposition to increased centralization: two opposing hypotheses

The point of departure – and null hypothesis – is that local governments would oppose increased central steering that would infringe local self-governance and autonomy, because local autonomy is regarded as an important democratic value and ideal in itself (Kjellberg 1995). The null hypothesis is based on the assumption and rationale that subordinate units would prefer autonomy over detailed steering and control. More specifically, it presupposes that local governments would prefer having the autonomy to develop integration policies addressing specific needs in their local community without central interference and to adapt national policies to local conditions. Additionally, if the central government were to propose policies that would regulate the local integration process, local governments may oppose central steering regardless of whether or not they actually agreed with such policy changes. In the integration literature, several studies show an incongruence between national and local integration policies (Dekker et al. 2015: 2; Jørgensen 2014; Emilsson 2016; Penninx et al. 2017; Alexander 2003; Jørgensen 2012). Thus, if municipalities adopt an approach to integration that deviates from the national approach, they will naturally oppose central steering that would infringe their leeway to develop and adapt integration policies to local integration philosophies. However, even if municipalities agree with national policy and are prepared to implement them, they may still oppose such central steering because local autonomy is one of the most fundamental features or principles of local government (Ladner and Keuffer 2021).

The opposing hypothesis is that local governments may support increased central steering infringing their self-governance and autonomy, the rationale being that local governments may have a self-interest in supporting increased centralization in certain situations. First, central steering may be a tool to ensure a redistribution of resources and responsibilities among municipalities (Kjellberg 1995). In such cases, central steering may delimit local autonomy for some local governments, while others may increase self-governance through central steering (Hernes 2021). If a municipality believes it would benefit from such a redistribution of responsibilities and resources, it may support increased centralization. Second, while the central government (in unitary states) may mandate local governments to implement national policies and provide specific services, in most countries the central government must finance such imposed responsibilities. Consequently, if local governments have already developed particular policies based on local needs and financed them through local funding – or if they have *not* implemented certain policies due to lack of funding – they may support centrally managed policies if they entail increased funding for municipal service provision. Third, central governance may involve questions not only about whether local governments are responsible for particular service provisions, but also about whether local service provision is regulated in such a way as to infringe local governments' leeway for local adaptation (Goldsmith 2010; Hernes 2017). Still, local sectoral interests may welcome increased central regulation to gain more leverage in their local or multi-level struggles to ensure sufficient resources and attention for their own sectoral field. For example, local departments working on integration may support increased regulation of the delivery of local services to refugees (e.g., introduction programs) because statutory regulation may facilitate funding for integration measures locally (Fiva et al. 2014). Finally, in Ladner et al.'s (2019) cross-national measurement of local autonomy, a country's local autonomy index rises with the number of policy fields for which local governments are responsible. According to the logic in the null hypothesis, one could assume that local governments would want responsibility for as many policy fields as possible in order to achieve more power. However, there are certain tasks they may not want responsibility for, either because they think that other governmental levels are better suited or to avoid the blame game in a potentially contested policy field.

Even though municipal actors may generally advocate for local autonomy as an important principle, the different rationales presented above demonstrate how local governments may have good reason to oppose or to support increased centralization.

Data and Methods

To study why municipalities may support centralization, I analyze the municipalities' position and arguments in five integration policy processes in Norway and Sweden that specifically address questions of central–local governance. I conduct document analyses of the municipalities' public consultation responses. See Table 1 for a list of the five policy processes included in the empirical analysis, their overall topic and the number of municipal consultation responses. The empirical analysis includes all 190 municipal consultation responses in the five policy processes.

Table 1. List and description of analyzed policy processes and number of municipal consultation responses in each process

Country	Policy change (year)	Content	Centralization/ decentralization	No. of municipal consultation responses
Sweden	Establishment reform (2009/10:AU7)	Responsibilities for introduction programs where centralized from municipalities to the Swedish Public Employment Service. Municipalities remained responsible for language and civic training.	Centralizing responsibility for integration program	41
	Law (2012/13: SfU11): Municipal reception of unaccompanied children (2014)	Removal of municipal voluntary agreements to settle SUARs, and introduction of central allocation of SUARs to municipalities.	Central allocation of SUARs	19
	Law (2016:38): A shared responsibility for receiving new arrivals	Removal of municipal voluntary agreements to settle refugees (who need publicly assisted settlement), and introduction of a new settlement model where the central government allocates refugees to municipalities.	Central allocation of refugees who do not find their own housing	34
Norway	Law: 30 (2016–2017): Amendments to the Introduction Act (introduction of trial authorization)	Proposal to let municipalities apply for exceptions from the Introduction Act, to test local time-limited pedagogical, organization and economic experiments in the introduction program.	Decentralization	14
	Law (2020-11-06-127) Integration Act	Redistribution of responsibilities for the introduction program by transferring selected responsibilities from the local to the regional level, and more detailed central steering of local introduction program content.	Centralization	82

The municipal responses to the consultation process in these policy processes are highly relevant for the exact purpose of this study (investigating why local governments may support or oppose proposals of increased centralization). First, the two sub-policies of integration policies investigated – settlement policies and integration programs – explicitly involve questions of central–local governance and how different actors prioritize between instruments promoting central coercion as opposed to local autonomy (Hernes 2017; Gebhart 2016). Further, in the five selected policy processes, central–local governance is at the heart of the policy proposal. As many other policy processes that regulate central–local governance in the integration field often also involve a shift towards more restrictive (or liberal) integration policies (Hernes 2021), these dual purposes may complicate analysis of the consultation process and argumentation. However, the policy proposals in this study are mainly about the central–local governance and distribution of responsibilities between public actors, which implies that these topics are – at least among – the main subjects in the public consultations process (and municipal responses). Third, in unitary states (such as Norway and Sweden), the central government may mandate and regulate the implementation of tasks by lower governmental levels. Sweden and Norway both have extensive welfare policies where the local governments have wide responsibility and autonomy for developing and implementing public policies. On local autonomy indices, both countries are classified as countries where local autonomy has a particularly strong standing (Sellers and Lidström, 2007). Thus, increased centralization may be presumed to face stronger opposition in these countries and should be thoroughly and explicitly justified in the policy process. In Scandinavia, public consultations constitute an arena for actors – including municipalities and their interest organizations – to state their opinion about proposed national policy changes. Accordingly, public consultation responses constitute an original and formal source to identify support for and opposition to centralizing policy instruments among the municipalities and the rationales behind different positions.

The analyzed municipal consultation responses are between one and 15 pages long.¹ In Norway, all public consultation responses for the selected policy processes are publicly available on government websites. The same applies in Sweden for the 2016 public consultation process. For the 2010 and 2014 processes, the municipal consultations were obtained after a formal request was made to the Department of Government Archives (*Arkiv-och registratursektionen, Regeringskansliet*).

The empirical analysis documents the municipalities' position on specific government proposals and whether they 1) support, 2) oppose or 3) do not refer to them or are unclear about their position. Furthermore, based on the theoretical assumptions underlying the two hypotheses, the actors' arguments for their position were mapped. Although municipal consultation responses constitute a reliable and original source, it is not always straightforward to determine whether a municipality supports or opposes specific policy changes. In some processes, there is only one concrete central–local regulation up for evaluation, while other policy processes involve various policy proposals. In the latter processes it may be challenging to determine whether a municipality is for or against the overall proposal, since it may support certain elements but oppose others. Thus, in the empirical analysis we document whether the actors explicitly express their position for each change that regulates central–local governance relations. In larger legislative processes involving multiple policy changes, the consultation response does not always include a response to all the proposed elements, and there are examples where the municipality discusses a policy change but does not express its position. In the two latter cases, the municipalities' responses were classified as “unclear”.

Analyses of Policy Processes

Norway

In Norway, the Introduction Act was the first nationally regulated introduction program for refugees. Until its implementation in 2004, integration measures for refugees were mainly a local concern, and varied widely between municipalities. The Introduction Act made it obligatory for municipalities to provide integration programs for refugees (and for refugees to participate), but the regulations were fairly general in character, and the municipalities retained

considerable autonomy regarding program implementation and content (Brochmann and Hagelund 2010).

In the fall of 2016, the Norwegian parliament considered the government's proposal to grant municipalities greater autonomy to make exceptions to the Introduction Act for organizational, pedagogical, and financial experiments. The financial exception was given the most attention. In the proposition, one example of a financial exception was one that would allow municipalities to test a reduced introduction benefit for participants until they passed a language test. In the public consultation, almost all municipalities were positive towards the organizational and pedagogical experiments, arguing that such local experiments would provide the municipalities with the local leeway to develop and test new approaches to improve the program quality for the participants. Sør-Varanger municipality argued: "The changes can give the municipalities opportunities to test good, clear and comprehensive measures on the participants."

However, only two out of 12 municipalities supported the possibility for municipalities to make financial exceptions. Although the proposal did not require municipalities to introduce such financial experiments but rather allowed them the possibility to conduct such experiments, the majority of the municipalities opposed increasing local leeway with regard to financial measures. Their main arguments against were that many doubted that experiments to reduce introductory benefit would have a positive impact on the integration process and that such experiments would create unequal service provision across the municipalities. Risør municipality wrote:

Over the past years, Risør municipality has stressed that refugees must be equal before the law and to have as few specific municipal arrangements as possible. It is important to ensure that people feel that they are treated fairly and equally, and we are skeptical towards a proposal that provides the municipalities with the possibility to conduct financial experiments.

The original proposal did not receive support from the opposition parties in the Norwegian parliament. However, an alternative proposal was passed that allowed the municipalities to experiment with pedagogical and organizational measures only (and not with financial experiments).

Apart from the above-mentioned policy change in 2016, the Norwegian integration program did not undergo any major changes in the 15 years since its introduction in 2004. However, in response to the government's 2018 Integration Strategy, a new Integration Act was passed in parliament in 2020 (implemented in 2021). The purpose of the new Integration Act was to increase immigrants' work participation through more targeted qualifications. The new act introduced changes in the central–local governance of the program by regulating both the responsibilities for and the content of the integration program for refugees. Overall, the public consultation reveals that the municipalities were divided. The municipalities either supported the proposed legislative changes, directly opposed them or challenged important premises in the proposition. The reasons they gave were also multifaced.

First, the county was formally included in the proposition as an actor in the integration process, and certain responsibilities for the service provision of the integration program were transferred from the local to the regional county level. More specifically, the county was to offer career guidance to participants and be responsible for Norwegian language training for participants that would be enrolled full-time in secondary education (which was already a county responsibility). About 40% of the municipalities did not refer or were unclear about their position to this policy change in their consultation response. Of those who took a clear stand, almost 70% explicitly supported the proposed reorganization and centralization of responsibilities to the regional level, emphasizing that it would promote equal service provision across the country and hold other government levels accountable for their part in the service provision. The City of Bergen stated:

The City of Bergen is pleased that the county level is assigned new tasks related to the qualification and inclusion of newly arrived immigrants and that these responsibilities are regulated in law. It is positive that an important partner for us in the integration field is thus given more responsibility within this administrative area. (Bergen, 2020)

Opposing municipalities questioned whether the county – as a new actor in the field – would have the necessary competencies to conduct their new tasks (competencies which, they argued,

the municipalities already possessed after years of experience). They were also skeptical towards a reorganization of responsibilities that would infringe the municipalities' leeway for local and individual adaptation of the program. Bømlo municipality wrote:

Although the proposed act makes it clear that it is the municipality's responsibility to facilitate a good integration process, it also proposes to transfer more of the municipality's tasks and income to the county level. Bømlo municipality considers that this may lead to a fragmentation of [existing] functioning cooperation models and pulverize strong professional environments that have been built up in municipalities out in the districts.

Second, while the first 2004 Introduction Act granted the municipalities considerable leeway and autonomy, the new Integration Act introduced detailed regulations governing program length and content for particular participant groups. It introduced two new obligatory program elements: life skills training courses (*livsmestringskurs*) and parental guidance courses for participants with children. It also proposed standardized differentiated program length (previously, almost all participants had two-year programs). For example, individuals with higher educational levels on arrival (high school levels or higher) would only be entitled to shortened programs from three months to one year, while individuals aged under 25 years should generally be enrolled in high school as part of the program and could attend programs for up to four years. This latter change met the most opposition from the municipalities. 80% (of those who took an explicit position) opposed standardized regulations on program length based on education background. Although many were positive about the possibility to provide prolonged programs for some groups, they strongly opposed shortened programs for individuals who had higher education levels on arrival. As Sogndal municipality argued:

We consider it as critical that the program should be shortened for several groups, and that the program length should be based on educational background and not on an individual assessment. It is not realistic that everyone with higher education from their home country will be qualified for work or higher education after three to six months.

Another new regulation was to introduce a "program quality requirement" (*forsvarligehtskrav*), obliging municipalities to provide programs on a par with certain professional standards and best practice, which entailed that the municipalities could be subject to audits by the County Governor to control if they fulfilled this "program quality requirement". The large majority – 84% – supported this new requirement. A professional forum for intermunicipal cooperation on refugee-related activities (*Faglig forum for kommunalt flyktningarbeid (FFKF)*), wrote:

FFKF is in principle positive that a 'program quality requirement' is introduced in the Integration Act and points out that the member municipalities believe that such a requirement will strengthen the legal security of the participants. It could help raise the quality of the programs in municipalities where this is not satisfactory today.

Overall, the new Integration Act increases central steering of the municipal service provision of the integration program through more detailed legislative requirements. Kristiansand municipality was generally positive to the proposal, but still questioned how increased detailed central steering could hamper the local leeway to make necessary local and individual adjustments:

The proposed act involves increased detailed [central] regulation. This could be problematic when the municipality develops an individual plan [for the refugee in the introduction program]. It can be demanding to prepare individual plans when the program is standardized and when – to a large degree – [program] goals, content and length are regulated.

Nevertheless, the proponents of more detailed central regulation argued that the proposed requirements to municipal service provision would strengthen *refugees'* legal safeguards and enhance program quality and coherent service provision across the country.

Sweden

From 1994 onward, the municipalities were responsible for integration programs for refugees. They had considerable leeway in how to implement such programs and were not even obliged to provide them. National guidelines were few and vague, allowing the municipalities greater autonomy and resulting in wide variation. In fact, studies revealed that few municipalities actually implemented these voluntary measures (Borevi 2010). The voluntary provision of

municipal integration programs continued until the Establishment Act was introduced in December 2010. The aim of the act was to facilitate and speed up integration into the labor market and society, and to reduce local variation of integration measures available (Andersson Joona et al. 2016). The reform involved centralizing responsibility for integration programs for refugees from the municipalities to a central agency, the Swedish Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*). Municipalities retained responsibility for language and civic courses. The Establishment Act meant increased state involvement in three respects: responsibility for and administration of the introduction programs were transferred from the municipalities to the state, state funding for the program increased, and the content of the program became regulated by law (Emilsson 2015).

In the public consultation, about 60 percent of the municipalities that expressed an explicit opinion, along with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, supported the proposal that the central government should assume overall responsibility for the integration of newly arrived refugees.² Their main arguments were that increased centralization would entail greater uniformity in the introduction program service provision and that the national agencies (particularly the Swedish Public Employment Service) should have a greater role in the integration process. Gothenburg municipality stated in their consultation response:

The City of Gothenburg shares the proposal's view that refugee reception and introduction is a national priority and welcomes the introduction of clear state responsibility. It is positive that the proposal suggests increased responsibility for the relevant [national] sector authorities.

Many municipalities emphasized that it was positive that national sector actors were formally included and held responsible: "The proposed system benefits the municipalities because all [national] authorities must take responsibility for the reception of refugees." (Hallstahammars municipality).

Twelve municipalities stated that the municipalities should retain responsibility for the integration programs. They argued that proximity to the individuals concerned and the holistic municipal view (being responsible for children and other non-work-related initiatives for adults) favored decentralized responsibility. Ljungby municipality argued:

Transfer of responsibility [from municipality to state] can damage a well-functioning model. It takes time to build up a new functioning organization and this can mean an unnecessarily long introduction for the individual who arrives. The municipality has short decision-making paths and opportunities for rapid changes.

Opposing municipalities also emphasized that if the state failed in successfully integrating the refugees, the responsibility would sooner or later fall on the municipality, so they preferred to have this responsibility from the start.

Concerning refugee settlement, Sweden has experienced several changes in recent years. The first Swedish settlement model was founded on voluntary agreements between a central agency and the municipalities, but the 1994 reform introduced self-settlement as a new principle. Refugees who did not self-settle continued to be settled through voluntary agreements between central and local government. Although subject to many debates since its introduction, the principle of self-settlement in the Swedish settlement model still prevails today for refugees who find their own housing (Borevi and Bengtsson 2015). However, the model has undergone changes in the central steering of those who do not find their own housing.

The voluntary municipal model (for those who do not find their own housing) was up for debate in the 2008 policy process leading up to the Establishment Act, but ultimately the model was not changed (Hernes 2017). The topic quickly resurfaced, although for a narrower target group. In 2011, the government proposed that the Migration Board should have the authority to allocate solitary underaged refugees (SUARs) to the municipalities. An increase in SUAR arrivals compared to earlier prognoses had created a shortage of voluntary arrangements for SUAR settlements. The government argued that this shortage overloaded certain municipalities, and implied long waiting periods for children in temporary accommodation. In the public consultation, the majority of the municipalities opposed central allocation of SUAR, arguing that the shortage of voluntary municipal settlement agreements was due not to municipal willingness, but to capacity, and feared that forced settlement could have a negative effect on long-term integration. Two municipalities, however, supported the proposal. These two

municipalities had received a large number of SUARs in their community and argued that increased central allocation was necessary because it would lead to a fairer distribution of responsibilities among the municipalities. Central allocation of SUARs was passed in the Swedish parliament and implemented in 2014.

In June 2015, the Swedish government proposed to expand the central authority to allocate all refugees who did not self-settle. The justification was that the voluntary municipal model did not make sufficient provision for settlements, and that prolonged settlement processes increased the number of self-settlements in areas that already had large concentrations of refugees. This time around, almost 70 percent of the municipalities and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions argued that central coercion was necessary to ensure more dispersed settlement and a fairer distribution of responsibilities in the municipal community.³ In the consultation, many municipalities explicitly weighed the value of municipal autonomy as an important principle against the necessity to ensure a more equal distribution of refugee settlements among municipalities, but argued that an infringement on local autonomy was necessary to ensure a fairer distribution of responsibilities among municipalities:

The municipality endorses the proposal, even though the proposal, in principle, is an intervention in local self-government that should not really be necessary. Considered against the background of the disproportionate refugee reception, where municipalities such as Flens [...] take far more responsibility for receiving new arrivals than many other municipalities, the municipality believes that the restriction of local self-government does not exceed what is necessary, given the purpose. (Flens municipality)

Why do municipal actors support or oppose increased centralization?

The empirical analysis of policy processes in Sweden and Norway produces two main findings: municipal actors often support measures of increased centralization, and the municipal community is often divided. How do municipal actors justify their support of, and opposition to, proposals for increased centralization? In the following section, I first synthesize the arguments for and against 1) increased centralization of responsibilities and authority, and 2) central steering through closer regulation of municipal service provision.

First, the empirical analyses show that many municipal actors support a transfer of responsibilities and authority to higher levels of government. In the Swedish processes for refugee settlement, supporting municipal actors emphasized that central allocation was necessary to ensure equal distribution of and responsibility for refugees among the municipalities. Additionally, many municipal actors supported a transfer of certain responsibilities from local to either national or regional level because it would make higher governmental levels responsible and accountable for certain parts of the service provision within their sector. In both the Swedish and the Norwegian cases, the municipalities have depended on these higher governmental levels to provide certain integration measures, but often without receiving them. For example, in Norway the county level had already been responsible for the provision of upper secondary education for this group, and in Sweden the Swedish Public Employment Service was mainly responsible for employment measures. In these cases, the municipalities argued that a transfer of responsibilities would be positive because it would make these higher levels of government legally accountable for the respective parts of the service provision in the integration process. Thus, since the integration process is a multi-level process including multiple actors at different governmental levels, the local sectoral interests may welcome higher levels of government being assigned more formal responsibilities and being made accountable for delivering measures within their fields of expertise. These actors also often point to equal service provision as supporting arguments for increased centralization.

Still, several municipal actors do oppose transferring the respective responsibilities for the integration field to higher government levels. These actors argue that a transfer of responsibilities would not be effective because it is the municipalities that possess the experience and competence to create such programs and are therefore best suited to ensure a holistic integration process.

Second, what arguments do municipal actors put forward for and against increased central steering through closer regulation of the municipal service provision? The empirical analysis

shows that municipal opponents of increased central regulation emphasize the need for local leeway to adapt national policies to local conditions. For example, in the Norwegian consultation, municipal actors argue that the proposal for closer regulation of the program content would give them less leeway for individual and local adaptation and warn that this may have a negative impact on the program quality. These actors also argue that reducing local leeway may result in fewer opportunities for user participation, emphasizing the refugees' rights as an argument for maintaining local autonomy. This latter point is in direct opposition to many of the arguments in favor of increased centralization, where municipal actors supporting such measures emphasize that increased central regulation is necessary to ensure the refugees' legal safeguards by ensuring equal service provision and minimum standards for program quality across all municipalities.

Concluding Discussion: Assessing Increased Centralization With Municipal Support

At first glance, and in line with the null hypothesis, it may sound counterintuitive for local governments to support policies that reduce or infringe local autonomy. However, the empirical analysis of policies regulating the central–local governance of integration policies in Norway and Sweden finds (partial) support for the opposing hypothesis, by documenting how some policies of centralization were (at least partially) supported by the municipalities, and that most changes were supported by the majority of municipalities and their national interest organizations.

As local autonomy has a particularly strong standing in Norway and Sweden compared to other countries (Sellers and Lidström, 2007), this finding may be surprising, however, the analysis of the local governments' argumentation shed light on their rationale. Overall, the analysis shows that municipal support for increased centralization may be motivated by municipalities' self-interest, e.g., either by (re)distributing responsibilities within the municipal community or by making higher levels of government legally accountable. An additional argument used by municipal actors is that increased central steering is necessary to ensure an equal service provision and uphold the target group's (refugees) legal safeguards against potentially poor local service provision.

In a larger comparative perspective, Norway and Sweden share many cultural, political, and institutional similarities as unitary social-democratic welfare states in Northern Europe, and we do not know whether similar arguments would be used by local governments in other countries with different institutional contexts or central-local governmental relations. Nevertheless, the arguments used align with the different values hypothesized and outlined by Kjellberg (1995) as more generic values for central steering. Looking beyond the Nordic similarities, Öberg and Wockelberg (2016) points out that within the Nordic model, Norway and Sweden are characterized by different institutional heritages when it comes to vertical autonomy and political steering. Nevertheless, despite these differences, the empirical analysis shows that Swedish and Norwegian local governments use the same type of arguments in favor of increased centralization. Thus, as these arguments reflect more general considerations favoring central steering over local autonomy applicable in both institutional contexts, it is plausible to assume that these arguments will also be used in other countries. To test the potential broader (bounded) generalizability of these findings, similar studies in countries that differ in their central-local relations – along with different political and institutional context – is encouraged.

Further, it may be plausible to assume that the policy area under study may also affect the relatively large municipal support and the arguments are used. The case of immigrant integration policy is a highly politicized topic, which may affect the municipal positions and argumentation. For example, the argument of making higher levels of government legally accountable, and thereby supporting the transfer of responsibility from the local to the regional or central level, may perhaps be more commonly used in relation to more politicized policy areas than for policies areas of less complexity or politicization. However, this hypothesis should be tested in future analyses.

The finding that many municipalities actually support increased centralization, raises a methodological question for the general central-local governance literature. In this literature, many scholars attempt to measure the degree of local autonomy cross-nationally (Sellers and Lidström 2007; Ivanyna and Shah 2014; Do Vale 2015; Ladner et al. 2016; Goldsmith 2002). Such indices are essential to investigate broader trends, but it is a complex task. Ladner and Keuffner (2021) provide an exemplary discussion of the challenges involved in creating such indices, and how the theoretical and methodological choices made by researchers may directly affect countries' scores and classification based on these indices. Furthermore, such indices are descriptive tools of a country's attributes and do not document or analyze *how* a country ended up with those attributes; for example, the process leading up to a change in local autonomy score (e.g., that a local government becomes responsible for a new policy field).

In this regard, the findings from this study exemplify the analytical difference between *descriptive classifications* of central-local policies and structures, and *analyses of the processes* driving these policies and structures. The empirical analysis shows several examples of increased centralization within the integration field, e.g., policies under which responsibilities are transferred from the local to the regional or central level, or policies delimiting local autonomy in service provision. However, these changes have come about with the partial support of the local governments themselves. This finding poses a challenge for how to use central-local indices when the aim is to analyze (changes in) a country's central-local governance relations: How should we analytically assess policy changes that involve increased central steering if such changes are supported by local governments themselves? For example, a general principle or criterium in several central-local indices is that local responsibility for a policy field implies a higher "autonomy score" (Sellers and Lidström 2007; Goldsmith 2002; Ladner et al. 2016). As Ladner and Keuffner (2021) write:

According to our understanding of local autonomy, the deciding element of local autonomy is the question of whether the provision of important tasks and services falls to local governments rather than to higher levels of the state. The more it does, the more important they are. (p220)

However, in the case of the Swedish Establishment Act, the majority of municipalities supported the transfer of the overall responsibility of the introduction program from the municipalities to a national agency. Although the local autonomy indices do not cover all policy areas and detailed changes in the countries' central-local relations, this Swedish empirical case raises a question about the general principle in these indices: that they emphasize that local responsibility for a policy field is a deciding indicator of local autonomy. Ironically, according to this general principle, the Swedish transfer of responsibility would imply that Sweden's "local autonomy score" would decrease, even though it was supported by the majority of municipalities. To use a hypothetical example to highlight the point: if a unified municipal community initiated and politically pressured the central government to transfer responsibility for a specific policy issue from the local to the national level, this would (ironically) be classified as a decrease in the municipalities' local autonomy score according to this principle in existing indices. These examples highlight why more studies of whether increased centralization happens with the municipals' support or opposition (or both) is crucial to make a broader assessment of how to measure developments or trends in local autonomy.

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Notes

¹ A few consultation responses also include additional attachments, but these are not analyzed, since the main positions and arguments are clarified in the main response.

² Of the 41 municipal consultation responses, 13 neither explicitly addressed this particular issue nor expressed an opinion. Sixteen of the remaining 28 responses explicitly supported the change.

³ 15 percent directly opposed, and 17 percent did not explicitly state their opinion.

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