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Political geographies of region work

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POLITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF REGION WORK explores how actors discursively enact the institutionalisation – and counter-institutionalisation – of regional spaces through an analysis of regionalisation processes in North Norway. Regions are spatially malleable targets of policy intervention, objects of identification, resources for mobilisation, and stakes of conflict. Regional reforms and the rupture they present provide a window into political struggles over regional formation and transformation. Against this backdrop, this thesis advances the notion of *region work* – the discursive representations and practices involved in contested regionalisation processes – by developing a conceptual typology for analysing the discursive enactment of regions through *institutional activism, institutional advocacy, systematic activism,* and *everyday practice*. The thesis additionally proposes that the term regional *counter-institutionalisation*; that is, region work in opposition to dominant representations of a region, can conceptually inform analyses of regional contestation. In doing so, this thesis contributes to the conceptual consolidation of regional geographies and the theorisation of contemporary regionalisation processes.

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Kristin Smette Gulbrandsen

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract:

Regionalisation processes and regionalist contestation have been the subjects of long-standing debates on state rescaling and political geographies of discontent. Similar dynamics are also present in Norway, where a recent regional reform has faced opposition along centre-periphery lines. These phenomena raise questions about how different actors discursively enact the institutionalisation and/or counter-institutionalisation of regions. Against this backdrop, this thesis explores the contested merger between Troms and Finnmark counties in North Norway and its related political geographies, and further develops the notion of *region work*; that is, the discursive representations and practices involved in regionalisation processes. To do this, the thesis empirically analyses four organisational actors – the *Solberg Government* and the interest groups *For Finnmark*, *Pasientfokus*, and *Kystopprøret* – using a critical discourse analysis approach. It does so in order to examine region work central to the implementation of the regional reform, organised resistance to it among regional elites, and regional contestation beyond the reform. In advancing the notion of region work, the thesis develops a conceptual typology for analysing the discursive enactment of regions through *institutional activism*, *institutional advocacy*, *systematic activism*, and *everyday practice*. The thesis also provides insight into how political struggles over regions may come about and unfold by highlighting how regions, beyond their symbolic nature, offer political, institutional, and material stakes of contestation and resources for articulating counter-discourses. Emerging from this analysis, the thesis proposes that the notion of regional *counter-institutionalisation*, denoting region work in opposition to dominant or hegemonic representations of a region, can have wider theoretical and conceptual significance for how regionalisation processes and the political struggle over regions are approached analytically.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, what has popularly become known as the 'roar of the periphery' or countryside has left its marks on voting behaviour and media discourse in Norway. Already in the 2017 parliamentary election, while failing to secure a majority for the centre-left, the agrarian Centre Party was described as "resurgent" following growing popular opposition to a number of centralising reforms by the incumbent conservative minority government (Aardal and Bergh, 2018: 1210). In the following 2019 municipal and regional elections, the Centre Party was declared the "major winner" in peripheral areas of the country, where the party yet again mobilised popular opposition against reforms (Stein et al., 2021b: 2). Both an urban-rural and a broader centre-periphery cleavage seemed to play a significant role in the election results, as well as in the expression of dissatisfaction with the central authorities' perceived lack of attention to peripheral areas (Eidheim and Fimreite, 2020). These factors signalled the return of a latent centre-periphery tension in the Norwegian political landscape, as well as the rise of a distinctly North Norwegian regional protest vote (Stein et al., 2021b).

Indeed, in the lead up to the elections in autumn 2019, the idea that various protests in North Norway constituted a regional 'rebellion' of its own was hotly debated in regional and national newspapers. These variously claimed that "many in North Norway feel as if the social contract has been broken" (Egeland, 2019), that the "trivialisation of North Norway's challenges among powerful circles in the south is alarming" (Eidissen, 2019), and that the rebellion "oozes genuine anger and deep distrust" (Stanghelle, 2019; henceforth, all translations from the Norwegian are made by me for the purpose of this thesis). In Finnmark (North Sámi: *Finnmárku*, Kven: *Finmarkku*), Norway's northernmost county, the results of a 2018 consultative referendum on its upcoming merger with the neighbouring county Troms (North Sámi: *Romsa*, Kven: *Tromssa*) pointed to high levels of discontent with the 'top-down' reform (Finnmark fylkeskommune, 2018). Other issues on the agenda in North Norway included the relocation of an air base, complaints regarding the commercial management of the air ambulance service, a closure of university campuses, and the campaign for extended railway

infrastructure in the region. All in all, these were issues that the Centre Party stood to gain from. In the municipal election that year, the party saw the largest increase in votes by percentage point both nationally (+5.9) and in the new Troms and Finnmark county (+11.8), traditionally a Labour Party stronghold. In contrast, the Labour Party saw the biggest decrease, despite gaining the greatest number of votes overall, seeing a -9.1 percentage point decrease in Troms and Finnmark, and -8.2 nationally (NRK, 2019). On the whole, the 2019 regional and municipal election results sent a clear message: 'rural rebellions' (*distriktsopprør*) were brewing in the country (Vik et al., 2020).[1]

In some ways, the parliamentary election in 2021 marked a culmination of these trends of geographically contingent discontent around centralising reforms. One dimension of this was that several opposition parties campaigned with the promise to reverse unpopular regional mergers, including but not limited to the amalgamation of Troms and Finnmark counties. The Socialist Left Party promised a "renewed local democracy" by saying "no to compulsory mergers of municipalities and counties, and ensur[ing] that already compulsorily merged municipalities and counties have their decisions cancelled if they so wish" (SV, 2021: 53). Likewise, the Labour Party, in its regional policy programme *By og land – hand i hand* ('City and country – hand in hand'), set out to "dissolve the compulsory merger of counties that wish to do so" if they were to win the election (Arbeiderpartiet, 2020).[2] Most strongly, the Centre Party positioned itself as principally "opposed to the municipal and regional reform initiated in 2014", believing "that it leads to centralisation and weakened democracy", and promised to "repeal mergers adopted in the 2013–2021 parliamentary periods if former municipalities and/or counties wish to do so, if necessary with a referendum" (Senterpartiet, 2021: 69).

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[1] It is a challenge to accurately translate the Norwegian term *distrikt* ('district'). As Knudsen (2018: 70) notes, the term "retains an ambiguous semantic and political significance, referring to rurality wherever it appears *and* to any location far from the capital, rural or not". Moreover, an official 'district index' is used to identify municipalities with specific 'district challenges' based on indicators related to geographical disadvantages and related societal challenges (Kommunal- og distriktsdepartementet, 2022a). Throughout this thesis, my translation of the term in different contexts is meant to convey this ambiguous meaning, as in the case of *regional* policy (*distriktspolitikk*) and *rural* rebellions (*distriktsopprør*). In some cases, I will leave the term in its original (as in *Distrikts-Norge*).

[2] The title of the programme is a nod to the famous Labour Party slogan from 1933, a time which saw collaboration between the Labour Party and the Centre Party's predecessor in the formation of what became the Norwegian welfare state (Selstad, 2003a).

This is not to say that the regional reform implemented in 2020 was the main concern occupying voters' attention. With the first instalment of the IPCC's (2021) Sixth Assessment Report fresh off the press and shaping public debate, climate change was the top issue on the electoral agenda in the lead-up to the election (Bergh and Karlsen, 2022). However, with the climate vote split between several parties on the left, the Green Party did not meet the four percent threshold, to the surprise of many (Aardal and Bergh, 2022), not least political commentators, who in their juxtaposition of urban ("young, radical […] with higher education") and rural (characterised by "disenfranchisement, protest and reform fatigue") voters placed their bets on the former (e.g., Sand, 2021). Eventually, it was the Labour Party and the Centre Party that formed a minority government in autumn 2021, with support from the Socialist Left Party. Their political platform, *Hurdalsplattformen*, had a clear regional policy agenda, announcing that "after eight years of increased inequality and centralisation, the government will transfer power to ordinary people in all areas of society" (Arbeiderpartiet and Senterpartiet, 2021: 5). The platform further proclaimed:

> The time for steamrolling local communities is over. No municipalities or counties should be forced or pressured to merge. Local communities will make more decisions themselves, and people will have more influence over and pride in their own community (ibid).

The 'roar of the periphery' had successfully made itself heard in the halls of parliament. In other ways, however, reactions to increased energy prices and the spectacular fall of both parties' popularity in subsequent polls, and their poor performance in the 2023 municipal and regional elections, have raised questions about the relationship between popular contestation and representation in the formal political arena.

Altogether, these political trends and the way they have materialised as forms of militant particularism (Harvey, 1995) in both election results and the rise of social movements are geographically and historically distinct, but far from unique to Norway. Whether they are rooted in mistrust (Flø, 2020; Stein et al., 2021a, 2023), growing political and economic alienation (Vik et al., 2022), or historical cultural and political cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967), they share similarities with observed developments elsewhere. Other Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland (Lundgren and Nilsson, 2018; Mattila et al., 2023), and more generally countries like France and the United Kingdom (Agnew, 2020; Martin and Islar, 2021), are cases in point. The Norwegian rural rebellions, and the way

they have materialised in Finnmark, may therefore be understood as examples of the local expression of a broader geography of discontent (McCann, 2020), the politics of resentment (Cramer, 2016), or the revenge of the places that 'don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), subject to much recent debate.

In the academic literature, these phenomena have also been at the centre of longer-standing debates that touch on several interrelated processes. This ranges from the so-called 'hollowing out' of the state (Jessop, 1997) through the rescaling of its political and economic organisation (e.g., Brenner, 2003; Keating, 2003; Swyngedouw, 2004), and subsequent 'filling in' in the context of devolution (Goodwin et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2005), to economic processes of regional decline and uneven development (e.g., Peck et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), including the persistence of 'regional problems' (Massey, 1979).

In this context, the scholarship on new regionalism has attempted to explain the resurgence of region as centres of growth in an increasingly globalised and connected world (e.g., Scott, 1998; Storper, 1995). Emphasis on the regional scale as "an economic unit in its own right" (Keating, 2017: 11) has subsequently positioned the new regionalism as "a vehicle for regional development strategies in a world where governance and power relations are rescaling" (Paasi, 2009: 216). A political expression of this can be found in the number of European territorial reforms aimed at more efficient regional governance implemented in the last decades (e.g., Blom-Hansen et al., 2012; Bourdin and Torre, 2021), as well as the emergence of other forms of regional development constellations (e.g., Frisvoll and Rye, 2009; Harrison, 2007; Sykes and Nurse, 2021).

The new regionalism has not been without its critics, however, especially regarding the way in which it has developed as a policy discourse, its inattention to the regional concept, and its economy-centred focus (e.g., Harrison, 2006; Lovering, 1999; MacLeod, 2001). In raising these critiques, scholars have begun to unpack the political dimensions of regionalisation processes, understanding the reorganisation of the state in light of geopolitical strategy and practice too (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Jonas, 2013; Jonas and Moisio, 2018). Similarly, research addresses another closely related aspect of the politics of regionalisation: the rise of "new or emerging spaces of regionalism" (Jones and MacLeod, 2004: 435) or identity regionalism (Keating, 2017) heightened by "collision[s] between old and new regionalism", such as in the case of territorial reforms (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013: 36).

Altogether, these interventions act as reminders that regionalisation processes are deeply political and always contested; not agent-less economic transformations

but rather, in key respects, politically produced, instrumentalised, and appropriated by different actors. These insights draw on an understanding of regions as relationally and geo-historically constituted (Harrison, 2006; MacLeod, 2001), associated with the new regional geography that emerged in the 1980s (e.g., Gilbert, 1988; Paasi, 1986; Pudup, 1988). From this perspective, regions are historically contingent and always in a process of becoming; they are institutionalised within a spatial system and social consciousness for a period of time through gaining territorial, symbolic, and institutional shapes which create temporarily stable structures of expectations (Paasi, 1996). Likewise, scholars have shown how regions can become de-institutionalised and even re-institutionalised at other moments in time (e.g., Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). 'Regional institutionalisation processes' as used in this thesis can hence be understood as a term that incorporates more specifically defined sub-processes (Section 3.5).

Raising the possibility that regions can have both relational and territorial dimensions (Harrison, 2013; Harrison and Growe, 2014), scholars have furthermore highlighted the ways in which regions can be understood as heterogeneous assemblages (Allen, 2011; Allen and Cochrane, 2007) and continually rewritten palimpsests (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017) embedded in networks extending beyond their boundaries. Additionally, in theorising regions in terms of practices and processes, researchers have accordingly explored the active and passive forms of 'region work' that go into enacting regional spaces (Paasi, 2010), related to questions of "how strategy and agency amongst social actors result in concrete processes of regional formation" (Valler et al., 2023: 434).

Against this backdrop, the overarching aim of this thesis is to advance the current understanding of processes involved in the (re)production of regions through closer theorisation of regional institutionalisation processes as a set of socio-spatial practices. In doing so, the thesis specifically seeks to explore discursive practices and representations involved in the institutionalisation, and likewise the de- and re-institutionalisation, of regions to further develop the notion of *region work*. Lines of inquiry hence include in which ways actors' region work mobilises various spatialising practices and discourses, but also how their region work is itself spatialised. The aim with this is to theoretically and conceptually construct a heuristic framework for analysing diverse processes of regional institutionalisation that foregrounds the role of actors and their discursive practices. Emerging from the empirical analysis, the thesis additionally explores the notion of *counter-institutionalisation*, suggesting that this complementary analytical term may capture the region work central to the contestation of state-led regionalisation

processes more precisely. To these ends, the study will address the following main research question:

How do actors discursively enact the institutionalisation of regions?

Answering this overarching research question will open the way for three related sub-questions: a) *how can such discursive regional institutionalisation practices be conceptualised*, b) *what are the implications of this for understanding political struggle over regions*, and c) *what are the implications of this for the theorisation of regionalisation?*

This thesis' analysis of the politics of contemporary regionalisation processes in Finnmark will contribute to shedding light on these questions. As already indicated, Norway is a country with a long history of centre-periphery cleavages. The most recent round of protest from *Distrikts-Norge* has therefore aptly been characterised as a 'new' rural rebellion (Almås et al., 2020). While these trends mirror developments elsewhere in Europe, the Norwegian context also differs in certain ways – from aspects of its economic conditions to dimensions of social and political trust (OECD, 2022; Stein et al., 2021a; Vik et al., 2022). Finnmark's particular history, including the circumstances of its incorporation into the Norwegian state, as well as its development of a regional identity which coincides with county institutions to a greater extent than elsewhere in the country (Baldersheim, 2003), positions the region as an excellent candidate for an exploratory case study. Crucially, the government's implementation of, and the interest group *For Finnmark*'s resistance to, the contested merger between Troms and Finnmark counties in 2020 provides a window into a specific case of broader and longer-term processes of regional institutionalisation. More than an analysis of regional mergers, however, this thesis also explores examples of more subtle forms of region work within the same period in the context of public interest groups such as *Kystopprøret* ('the Coastal Rebellion') and *Pasientfokus* ('Patient Focus'). Together, this allows the analysis to address a variety of political geographies of region work.

As such, the analysis presents a microcosm of region work involved in the contested politics of regionalisation: from the 'top-down' implementation of regional mergers to interest groups mobilising both regional elites and grassroots activists. The thesis sets out to explore these practices and processes through the following working questions, each guiding its respective empirical chapter: *how are state-led regionalisation processes such as territorial reforms enacted discursively in Norway?* (Chapter 7), *how is the state's regionalisation discourse contested locally in Norway?* (Chapter 8), and *how do regionalisation discourses performed by state and*

local actors interact with region work beyond the administrative and political shape of regions in Norway? (Chapter 9).

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature on regional geography, regionalisation processes, and regionalist movements. By establishing the conceptual starting points of the thesis, the chapter places the study within contemporary regional scholarship and situates its intended contributions towards the conceptual consolidation of this literature. Chapter 3 subsequently introduces the theoretical framework of the thesis and opens a discussion of regional institutionalisation as a set of socio-spatial practices. The chapter proposes two conceptual contributions to the scholarship on the formation and transformation of regions. Firstly, in exploring the notion of region work, it presents an analytical typology which is later used heuristically to guide the analysis. The typology moves former definitions of region work from one-dimensionally agency-based to also considering the socio-spatial context that it is performed within, hence presenting a fuller spectrum of region work from *everyday practice* and *institutional advocacy* to *systematic activism* and *institutional activism*. Secondly, the chapter discusses the value of *counter-institutionalisation* as an addition to the established regional institutionalisation vocabulary. Emerging from the later empirical analysis, the notion is introduced to ensure more analytical clarity about the political ends to which region work is performed, distinguishing, for example, between re-institutionalisation and counter-institutionalisation processes.

Following this, Chapter 4 presents the theoretical-methodological approach of the thesis, introducing critical discourse analysis in terms of its theoretical premises and methodological implications. The chapter especially emphasises the dialectical relationship between discourse and space, arguing that discourse is both spatialised and has spatialising effects. Chapter 5 subsequently describes and motivates the study's research design and introduces the empirical material underpinning the case study: 221 interest group blog entries, 49 other texts including government white papers and draft bills/resolutions along with internet sources, 10 key informant interviews, and a smaller element of field observation at political events, and analysis of archival material. After this, Chapter 6 provides a short geo-historical introduction to Finnmark's institutionalisation as a region; in so doing, functioning as a bridge between the theoretical and methodological chapters and the following analysis.

After this introduction to the case region, Chapters 7, 8, and 9 delve into the empirical analysis. Chapter 7 deals specifically with the 'top-down' dimension of

the 2020 regional reform and its foundations. Addressing how state-led regionalisation processes such as territorial reforms are enacted discursively in the Norwegian context, the chapter examines the simultaneous institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation of Troms and Finnmark counties that was proposed in the government-initiated reform. In doing so, the analysis highlights the direct institutional activism underpinning the reform, including its new regionalist foundations, observable in the suggestion that the new regional structure would enable each region to unlock its growth potential. The analysis also shows the role of institutional advocacy in facilitating the reform, suggesting that especially High North policy and its dual emphasis on foreign- and regional policy mutually reinforced the new regionalist discourse behind the government's reform ambitions in a more indirect way.

Subsequently, Chapter 8 explores the local resistance generated towards the regional reform through an examination of the discourse and strategies of a regional interest group which aim was to reverse the Troms-Finnmark merger. Addressing how regionalisation discourses are contested locally in Norway, the chapter explores the interest group's systematic activism and contribution to the region's counter-institutionalisation, which was marked by a mobilisation of regional history and identity.

Chapter 9, by extension, investigates how regionalist discourses have become embedded in a broader narrative of centre-periphery contestation through an examination of the discursive practice of two regional interest groups, respectively engaged in political struggles around fisheries policy and the placement of a local hospital. In exploring how regionalisation discourses (from 'above' and 'below') interact with region work beyond the administrative and political shape of regions in Norway, the chapter places these groups' region work between *everyday practice* and *systematic activism*: on the one hand, primarily as a by-product of their more overarching narratives about centre and periphery in the context of their respective political focus, but on the other hand also retaining elements of more direct region work. This is illustrated, for instance, by these groups' suggestion that the regional scale is best positioned to manage the region's fisheries resources, and in the contrasting view that the county acts as a hindrance for the interests of the region's largest city.

Finally, Chapter 10 concludes the thesis with a discussion of what the analysis contributes to the conceptualisation of discursive practices of regional institutionalisation, the understanding of political struggle over regions, and the

theorisation of regionalisation. These contributions can be briefly summarised in three points.

Firstly, the thesis conceptualises the discursive enactment of regional institutionalisation in terms of region work; that is, discursive representations and practices involved in contested regionalisation processes. In drawing on, and advancing, previous work on this notion, this contributes conceptually and theoretically towards more consolidated regional geographies. Specifically, conceptualising region work in terms of both its *forms* and *contexts* reinserts structure in the framework itself, resolves the ambiguities contained in previous definitions of the term, and consequently provides a more comprehensive account of how such practices and discourses – and by extension, regionalisation processes – operate. Applying this framework to the empirical analysis highlights the variety of discursive practices involved in the initiation as well as contestation of regionalisation processes in a Norwegian context.

Thus, *secondly*, the thesis provides insights into how political struggles over regions may come about and unfold. The analysis highlights that the efficacy of region work may be affected by the depth of a region's institutionalisation; the way in which it is more than discursive or social in a narrow sense. Material, institutional, as well as symbolic dimensions of the region make up the multi-layered context for an actor's ability to produce a salient counter-discourse. Additionally, the very same dimensions may also represent the *stakes* of struggle over regions, when their significance go beyond the symbolic to encompass what they offer politically, materially, or institutionally for different stakeholders.

Thirdly and ultimately, the thesis' empirical analysis of how different actors engage in region work enables a more theoretical and conceptual exploration of the ends to which their region work is aimed. Starting from the theoretical notion of counter-discourse, the analysis provides empirical examples of direct and indirect forms of region work which contest a dominant or hegemonic representation of the region across its territorial, symbolic, and institutional dimensions. While this may coincide with attempts to re-institutionalise a region, discussed further in relation to strategic essentialism and resistance, the notion of *counter-institutionalisation* may be better placed to capture the subversive intent or aims of the region work underpinning such an institutionalisation process. This has wider theoretical and conceptual significance for how regionalisation processes and the political struggle over regions are approached analytically.

2 Regional beginnings

The 'region' is without doubt a geographical concept of historical disciplinary importance; in some accounts endowed with the status as "the core or 'crown' of the discipline" (Paasi, 2009: 217), at least when approached with a present-day lens (Livingstone, 1992: 4-6). Representing an ideographic and synthesising approach to the study of the world, traditional regional geography sought to examine the spatial expression of different phenomena; in Richard Hartshorne's (1939: 463) influential version, its aim was to "acquire a complete knowledge of the areal differentiation of the world". As such, the regional concept played a role in cementing the status of geography as an academic discipline at the time, "serv[ing] as a safeguard against the absorption of geography as part of other academic fields" (Paasi, 2009: 215). The traditional regional geography's emphasis on the specific and its descriptive orientation, however, left the chorological approach open to critique from competing approaches emerging in the second half of the twentieth century. Culminating in an infamous exchange, instigated by Fred Schaefer's (1953) posthumously published critique of Hartshorne's *The Nature of Geography* (1939), the debates that followed have been said to reflect a generational divide in American geography – and certainly also beyond (e.g., Forsberg, 2022) – between practitioners of traditional regional geography and the new spatial science (Barnes and van Meeteren, 2022; Martin, 1994; Sack, 1974). While the Hartshonian regional *approach* hence fell out of fashion, though it still maintained its proponents (e.g., Hart, 1982) – as did the French tradition inherited from Paul Vidal de la Blache through its influence on humanistic geography – the regional *concept* remained alive and well within quantitative regional science (Paasi et al., 2018).

This thesis is of course not a work of regional geography in a traditional sense, nor does it attempt to produce anything near a complete knowledge of areal differentiation. Such claims would have a hard time standing today (cf. Haraway, 1988). There is nonetheless value in acknowledging the heritage of more contemporary approaches to regions (Thrift, 1994), because as Holt-Jensen (1990: 84) argues, "new generation[s] of practitioners have a tendency to assign

their innovations with more fundamental importance than they actually have" through "simplifications of the previous generation's view of the discipline" (also Holmén, 1995; Paasi and Metzger, 2017). In fact, practice and debates within traditional regional geography in the first half of the twentieth century were neither homogenous nor uncontentious (e.g., Forsberg, 2022; MacLeod and Jones, 2001; Paasi et al., 2018). Hence, introducing this chapter with a brief nod to the longer tradition of regional geography – see for instance Livingstone (1992) for a more detailed account – is intended as a reminder that conceptual and methodological ambivalence towards the region is far from new (Paasi, 2009).

In fact, while the regional concept has exerted influence on the practice of many subdisciplines of human geography, it remains a typically elusive notion, difficult to define and often discussed in vague ways (Keating, 1998), resulting in its "ontological slipperiness" (Paasi and Metzger, 2017: 21). What emerges is a range of conceptions of the region within the practice of human geography, from the pre-scientific to the discipline-centric to the critical (Paasi, 2022), along with a number of other typologies (e.g., Bernaciak, 2014). Such approaches to the region correspond broadly to different types of research and serve different purposes. Researchers have also distinguished conceptually and analytically between so-called 'old' regions, associated with historically and territorially embedded regions, and 'new' regions, which may be ad-hoc political projects, while recognising that the boundary between the two may be blurred or overlapping (Paasi, 2009b: 133; also Syssner, 2006). With notions like regionalisation and regionalism added to the mix, a *conceptual* (as opposed to a *political-administrative*) 'regional mess' is near inevitable (cf. Frisvoll and Rye, 2009; McCallion, 2008; Selstad, 2003; Zimmerbauer, 2017).

This chapter provides a review of past and current literature on regional geography, regionalisation, and regionalism with the aim of framing the theoretical and empirical setting of this thesis within contemporary regional scholarship. The first section outlines the key regional literature and debates that this thesis engages with theoretically. In doing so, it clarifies how the thesis approaches regions and provides a foundation for the following chapter, which engages more thoroughly with theoretical and conceptual questions around the study of regional institutionalisation processes. The second and third sections offer an overview of more empirically oriented scholarship on regionalisation processes and regionalism to ground the later analysis, though these are also interwoven with reference to developments in regional theory and concepts. As with any narrative, this is necessarily a partial and situated overview, reflective of

the geographical debates and traditions in which I situate this thesis. Against this backdrop, the final section further contextualises the aims of the thesis that were set out in Chapter 1.

2.1 Regions reconstructed

After what was ostensibly a hiatus in regional research following the rise of spatial science, systematic geography, and the quantitative revolution in the second half of the twentieth century, a set of theoretical approaches called 'new' or 'reconstructed' regional geographies began to emerge as a subdiscipline of human geography in the 1980s (e.g., Allen et al., 1998; Bradshaw, 1990; Gilbert, 1988; Gregory, 1989; Massey, 1984; Paasi, 1986; Pred, 1984; Pudup, 1988; Sayer, 1989; Thrift, 1994). Such debates did not only take place in the English-speaking world of geography; similar consideration around the future and purpose of regional geography could for instance also be found in the Nordic context in this time period (e.g., Andersson, 1987; Hägerstrand, 1987; Mead, 1987). These new approaches presented a reaction not only to the aforementioned traditional regional geography, associated with the work of geographers such as Vidal de la Blache (e.g., 1903) and Hartshorne (e.g., 1939), but also to the field of spatial science that had emerged in the 1950s as its antithesis (Hubbard et al., 2002: 28), along with what was perceived as overly structuralist and place-insensitive strands of Marxist geography (Massey, 1993).

Despite constituting more of an umbrella of likeminded approaches than a defined research agenda and theory (Bradshaw, 1990), which has been levied as a critique against the subdiscipline (Holmén, 1995), works belonging to this broad category had some distinctive features in common. Importantly, the emerging approaches were influenced by new developments in, and engagement with, social theory – the absence of which from the debate had placed a limitation on the theoretical development of regional geography in the first half of the century (Forsberg, 2022: 36-37; also Thrift, 1994). Among the heterogeneous but similar new approaches, at least four distinct orientations could be identified: humanist, Marxist or structuralist, structurationist, and realist (Bradshaw, 1990; Gilbert, 1988). Each brought different theoretical and conceptual concerns to the table and indicate the influence of social theory on new regional geography at the time. Many works of new regional geography were explicitly or implicitly influenced by critical realist reasoning (e.g., Massey, 1993; Paasi, 1986; Sayer, 1989), yet others

have been critical of this influence (e.g., Jonas, 1988; Thrift, 1990). According to Paasi and Metzger (2017), especially the emergence of critical regional studies based in Marxist and humanistic approaches were key in the development of the subdiscipline, highlighting economic relations of uneven development and experiential dimensions of regional identity respectively (e.g., Buttimer, 1979; Massey, 1978).

This did not, however, to suggest unanimous support of such regional, or related 'locality', perspectives. Neil Smith (1988), for instance, warned researchers against losing sight of global processes due to privileging the local scale, additionally arguing that such research tended towards empiricism at the expense of generalisation and theory development (Smith, 1987). The risk, others argued, was the reification of the local scale – a scale which in this view provided a less meaningful unit of investigation than in the past (Jonas, 1988).

Proponents of new regional geography, in turn, challenged this interpretation of the field. In Nigel Thrift's (1994: 227) view, the importance of doing regional geography could be found in examination of the particular and everyday, arguing that "the contextual cannot be swept under the carpet by grand social theories, for it remains where we actually live". Doreen Massey (1993) contended that such studies could be both international in their outlook and theoretical in their ambition, while others proposed research strategies for operationalising such an agenda (e.g., Howitt, 1992). In approaching regions 'critically', researchers hence challenged the notion of regions as strictly bounded spaces (Paasi, 2022: 4). Massey (1979), for example, made the case for analysing regional transformations in relation to economic processes at other spatial scales. This is a position which reflects for instance David Harvey's (2006: 273-274) notion of 'relational space' where spaces are defined by the processes and practices that constitute it, internalising external influence both in time and space.

Within the field, there have also been attempts to more explicitly acknowledge gender and gender relations in regional geography (e.g., McDowell and Massey, 1984; Oberhauser, 1995; Townsend, 1991). Thrift (1990, 1991, 1993), furthermore, outlined challenges of postmodernism and poststructuralism for the new regional geography and called for a renewed emphasis on the subject, agency, and context in regional studies in a trio of progress reports. More recent critiques, however, have highlighted the field's lack of engagement with questions of representation, essentialism, and the maintenance of colonial power structures (Koch, 2016), and a failure to construct a closer relationship with the post-

colonial area studies literature which emerged in the same period, despite its synergies (Sharp, 2019).

Anssi Paasi's work on regions (e.g., 1986, 1991, 1996) constitutes an important branch of the broader field of new regional geography, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter 3. This work has sought to address the question of how regions emerge, are reproduced, and may eventually disappear from a regional system and socio-spatial consciousness. As opposed to approaches that metaphorically conceptualise regions as biological 'organisms', or as static locations, regions are in this view conceived of as

> A complex synthesis or manifestation of objects, patterns, processes, social practices and inherent power relations that are derived from simultaneous interaction between different levels of social processes [that] operate on varying geographical and historical scales (Paasi, 1996: 33).

This understanding of regions relates to another key commonality within new regional geographies: the recognition that regions are socio-spatial entities, constituted through social practice (Paasi, 2022). In this line, regional geographers have argued, our understanding of regions should reflect their constitution in "institutional and individual practices as well as the structural features with which those practices are interwoven" (Pred, 1984: 280), and hence, be "based on their 'becoming' rather than on their 'being'" (Paasi, 1996: 31). The answer to the question of how a region emerges could therefore be understood in terms of its *institutionalisation*, Paasi (1986) proposed – both territorially, symbolically, institutionally, and finally, as an established region.

At the core of this framework is the conceptualisation of regions as contingent products of historical processes, both socially and materially. The contingency of regions implies that they "are not eternal units but, as manifestations of various institutional practices, emerge, exist for some time and disappear in the transformation of the world state system" (Paasi, 1996: 3). This has drawn attention to the fundamentally unstable character of spatial units which are oftentimes presented and experienced as natural, eternal and unchangeable, and how they can become de- and re-institutionalised. Altogether, this approach has encouraged thinking of regions as historically and geographically contingent; to avoid the 'tired metaphor' of social construction (Hacking, 1999: 35), regions are viewed as produced (Lefebvre, 1991) or institutionalised (Paasi, 1986).

In summary, the new or reconstructed regional geography constituted a set of related approaches with commonalities in terms of their conceptualisation of the

region and influence from social theory. As Paasi, Harrison, and Jones (2018: 4) describe it:

> Characterizing the new regional geography was the coming together of previously isolated subdisciplines (economic, social, political, cultural, historical) and philosophical approaches (Marxism, humanism, critical social theory, realism) in geography through a shared interest and common ground in a (re)new(ed) geography of regions.

The aim of these new regional geographies was in many ways to redress the traditional regional geography's parochialism – its inability to contextualise regional change nationally and globally (Bradshaw, 1990: 316) – hence providing analytical tools for examining socio-spatial transformations, including processes of state transformation that began to accelerate in the 1980s. These approaches simultaneously sought to provide analyses with a sensitivity to the specific that redressed the problems of excessive structuralism (Massey, 1993). At the same time, however, what has been described as "the ongoing, sometimes radical, reorganization of social, political and cultural spatialities around the world" associated with globalisation may present a challenge to the continued relevance of regional geography (Paasi and Metzger, 2017: 23). The next section will describe this context, outline debates which have followed on processes of globalisation and regionalisation, and highlight the role of the so-called 'new regionalism' as an academic and policy-making discourse within this broader literature. In relation, the section will also describe how these empirical processes have been the subject of, and prompted new conceptual debates in, new regional geography inspired analyses.

2.2 Regionalisation as political and economic process

Around the same time as the emergence of new regional geography, and as discussed above, providing one of the rationales for this development, a number of political and economic processes of state transformation prompted the observation of a simultaneous move towards the local and global. This has variously been described in terms of 'glocalisation' (Swyngedouw, 1992, 1997, 2004) or processes of upwards and downwards devolution (Keating, 1997). The wider context in which these processes took place has been framed as primarily

characterised by neoliberalism and capital mobility (ibid: 27). According to Keating, the implications of this are that

> States can no longer effectively control capital movements and fear that any limitation on the prerogatives of capital will drive investors into rival countries. National policies have thus switched from a concern with regional balance within the state to the need to promote national competitiveness in global markets and to attract capital by offering the best sites and opportunities (ibid).

It is in this context that scholars have observed processes contributing to what has been called the denationalisation of the state, which is argued to be characterised by "the 'hollowing out' of the national state apparatus with old and new state capacities being reorganized territorially and functionally on sub-national, national, supranational and trans-local levels" (Jessop, 1997: 573-574). Likewise, Murphy (1996: 110) has argued that "increasingly obvious disjunctions between the political organization of territory and the geography of economic, social, and political life are shaking the territorial assumptions of the post-World War II era at their very foundations", leaving open questions "about the scale of political-territorial organization, about the role of substate and superstate regional formations, and about the nature of the territorial state itself".

In short, the literature at the time maintained that the emergence and acceleration of the dual trends of globalisation and regionalisation at the sub-national scale would come to have serious implications for the traditional role of the nation state as a 'container' of "power, wealth, culture and society" (Taylor, 1994: 152). Stronger versions of these claims – what Taylor describes as a premature 'end' or 'demise' of the state thesis and Goodwin, Jones, and Jones (2005: 423) as "'boosterist' accounts of globalization" – predicted the growing irrelevance and/or imminent downfall of the nation state. However, such claims about the fading relevance of the state have been challenged by a number of scholars (e.g., Murphy, 2013). As Keating (1997: 27-28) contends,

> The state has not faded away, or even retreated. Rather, it has been penetrated by new influences, whether supranational, subnational or sectoral. Hierarchical control has given way to complex patterns of negotiation. Borders are permeable and frontiers lose their significance as non-state actors can communicate across space.

In a similar vein, others have responded to the hollowing out thesis with the complementary notion of 'filling in' (e.g., Goodwin et al., 2005; Jones et al.,

2005). Such works argue that while the notion of hollowing out accurately identifies contemporary processes of denationalisation, destatisation, and internationalisation (cf. Jessop, 1997), it only provides a partial conceptual framework for explaining how these processes have subsequentially taken place in spatially and temporally specific ways (Goodwin et al., 2005). The notion of filling in hence enables the analysis of "the differing organisational and institutional settlements that can develop within, for instance, the various regions of the state"; in other words, the creation, restructuring, or dismantling of governance bodies at other spatial scales (Jones et al., 2005: 338).

The broader debates on globalisation, regionalisation, the role of the nation state, and its 'hollowing out' and 'filling in' in this period are closely related to, and mirror, debates within the 'new regionalism' that emerged around the same time as an academic and policy-making discourse. The new regionalism, associated first and foremost with works in economic geography, but also political science, has been concerned with explaining the resurgence of regionalism and regions as centres of growth in an ever-more connected world (e.g., Keating, 1998; Scott, 1998; Storper, 1995). The new regionalism has been associated with moves towards decentralisation, emphasis on inter-regional competition, and neoliberal policy (Amin, 2004; Jonas, 2012; Keating, 2008b). While Lovering (1999) quite polemically challenged both the normative and empirical foundations of the new regionalism, and distinguished between its 'vulgar' and 'sophisticated' forms, others have raised more sympathetic critiques, calling for closer conceptualisation of the region as relationally and geo-historically produced (e.g., Harrison, 2006; MacLeod, 2001), inspired by the new regional geography (e.g., Paasi, 1986) and concurrent scalar debates (e.g., Brenner, 2001). Specifically, MacLeod and Jones (2001: 676) have made the case for "a new geography *of* regions" (emphasis in original) wherein the region itself, and its process of formation and construction, is approached as the object of analysis.

Consequently, debates surrounding the new regionalism have been influenced by, and in turn also shaped, developments in new regional geography. This literature has been marked by debates on the bounded contra porous characteristics of regions; that is, whether they should be conceived of or 'read' as primarily territorial or relational (e.g., Goodwin, 2013; Jones and MacLeod, 2004; Morgan, 2007; Murphy et al., 2015; Varró and Lagendijk, 2013). In broad strokes, this debate saw a relational reaction grounded in network approaches (e.g., Allen and Cochrane, 2007; Amin, 2004) to more territorial and multi-scalar conceptualisations of regions, which again produced counter-responses that have

called for "retain[ing] regions and territories in geographical thinking" (Paasi et al., 2018: 9). Altogether, this has prompted a proliferation of theoretical and conceptual approaches in which regions are approached as both territorial and relational (Cochrane, 2012; Harrison, 2013; Harrison and Growe, 2014b), and understood in terms of more-than-relational regional geography (Jones, 2022), their materiality (Metzger, 2013), assemblages (Allen, 2011), and as products of scalar politics rather than fixed at a given scale (Gruby and Campbell, 2013; Painter, 2008).

Moreover, mirroring calls for more attentiveness to "the continuing roles played by the state and political strategy in the production of new sites and scales of economic governance" (Goodwin et al., 2005: 424), scholars engaging with the new regionalism, as well as the political construction of other regional forms such as city regions and megaregions, have sought to highlight the role of the state and geopolitical practice in the political construction of such regional spaces (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Jonas, 2013; Jonas and Moisio, 2018). In doing so, they have made the case for adopting geopolitical alongside geoeconomic explanatory models (Jonas, 2013: 195) for regional spaces which are oftentimes defined economically (Harrison, 2010: 18). From this perspective, emphasising geopolitical practice and the role of political actors in producing regions facilitates a better understanding of regionalisation as a 'top-down' process or phenomenon resulting from state policy (Keating, 1997: 18), in which regionalisation and regionalism are conceived of as social practices (Paasi, 2009a). This can be observed in different streams of the literature, such as works engaging with 'Europe of the Regions' as a policy discourse that failed to fully materialise (e.g., Elias, 2008; Hepburn, 2008; Keating, 2008a; Loughlin and Antunes, 2020), regional policy implementation (e.g., Keating, 1997: 21 ff), and region-building, for example in inter- and transnational contexts (e.g., Keskitalo, 2007; Zimmerbauer, 2013) and on the sub-national scale (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Jonas, 2013; Jonas and Moisio, 2018; Jones, 2015; Sykes and Nurse, 2021). Scholars have proposed different avenues for examining these processes and practices of region-building or production of space more broadly, for instance in terms of actors' region work (Paasi, 2010), cartographic representations (Dühr, 2020), and spatial *imaginaries* (Moisio and Jonas, 2021; Steinberg et al., 2015; Valler et al., 2023), *conceptualisations* (Alagic et al., 2017), *practices*, and *tools* (Boudreau, 2007).

A Norwegian new regionalism?

The above overview of literature on glocalisation, new regionalism, and the hollowing out of the state is of course a highly particular one. As Newman and Paasi (1998: 199) argue, it is deeply rooted in a North American and Western European postmodern "territorial narrative"; materialised in Eurocentric cartographic anxieties (Painter, 2008) and lack of engagement with non-European regionalities (Tomaney, 2010). Within the European context, too, there is reason to examine how processes related to state rescaling and regionalisation unfold in geo-historically specific ways (Syssner, 2006). For example, at the time when 'Europe of the Regions' discourse was at its height in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the regional scale of government in Norway was rapidly being diluted in terms of responsibilities; its continued existence an open question (Selstad, 2003b; also Bukve, 2000). It is therefore necessary to briefly provide some historical and political context to pinpoint to what extent – and in what form – we can talk about new regionalism in a Norwegian context (aspects of which are discussed further in Chapters 7 and 8), before unpacking the contested politics of regionalisation in the following section.

The debate about the regional scale of government in Norway, while rooted further back in history, has its more immediate source in reforms of the 1970s, in which the counties (*fylker*) became independent political actors through the introduction of elected county councils. This transformation had its basis in ideals regarding local democracy and grassroots power, which also played a significant role in Norway's 1972 European Community referendum (Selstad, 2003b: 18). Moreover, it reflected the rise of the meso-scale as well as trends of political decentralisation in Europe more generally (Bukve, 2000; Loughlin and Peters, 1997). Neoliberalism and new public management fast became new ideals of governance in the 1990s, however, particularly for the political right. The Progress Party and the Conservative Party both eventually adopted the position that a government structure *without* a regional level would be most efficient (Selstad, 2003b), reflecting considerations regarding regional policy in other European countries too (Bukve, 2000). Consequently, two ideologically opposed camps emerged on the question of the regional level of government: a regionalist and 'periphery-friendly' one, primarily valuing the local democratic function of the counties, and a neoliberal and urbanist one, seeking to slim down or get rid of a bureaucratic, inefficient institution (Selstad, 2003b).

The policy debate at the time was nevertheless influenced by new regionalism discourse (Veggeland, 2000: 167), reflecting a gradual "Europeanisation" of

Norwegian discourse on regions (Bukve, 2005: 139). Beyond questions of the regional level of government, influence of the policy discourse could also be observed in the emergence of other types of regional development constellations, from counties seeking cooperation with other counties (Bukve, 2005) and city-regional governance networks (Hidle and Leknes, 2014; Holmen, 2011), to rural regional development collaboration (Frisvoll and Rye, 2009) and cross-border initiatives (Lysgård, 2001) which may involve a combination of public and private actors. Importantly, the speeding up of urbanisation processes in the 1990s in Norway – which still had an urban population share lower than neighbouring Sweden, Denmark, and Finland at the time (The World Bank, 2023) – was followed by an emphasis on city-regions rather than more peripheral areas (Bukve, 2000; Selstad, 2003b). This signalled something of a "regime change" in the regional debate by the early 2000s (Selstad, 2003b: 19). What emerged was a spectrum of positions on the counties ranging from those seeking to maintain them as they were, those wishing to emulate larger, European inspired regions, and those preferring a two level structure of government (Gjertsen, 2005). At the time, however, Veggeland (2000: 165-166) argues that the policy process inadequately dealt with new regionalist questions, because the process was limited by thinking in terms of structural and geographical uniformity, concerns about long distances within larger regional units, and the view of urbanisation as a threat to rural areas.

Both Selstad's and Veggeland's perspectives therefore suggest that regional policy considerations – *distriktspolitikken* – have been important for the way that Norwegian new regionalism has developed. This must be understood in the historical context of Norway's regional policy tradition. Specifically, the country's late industrialisation meant that regional development policy in the aftermath of the Second World War was aimed at addressing regional imbalances connected to the primary sector (Teigen, 2019). In the 1960s until the 1980s, regional policy was mainly redistributive in nature, aimed at decentral growth (Bukve, 2000). The traditional aim of preserving decentralised settlement patterns only became challenged by a growth-oriented narrative in more recent history (Cruickshank et al., 2009), and the 1980s eventually saw a shift from top-down redistributive to bottom-up innovation-oriented regional policy (Bukve, 2000). Finally, the development of the regional level of government itself has been historically closely tied to rural areas, since cities remained outside of this structure (Selstad, 2003b).

Aside from these factors, Gjertsen (2005) highlights two additional reasons for why the Norwegian new regionalism debate has lagged behind its European

counterparts: Norway's lack of membership in the European Union, and its strong tradition of top-down regional governance – a mismatch with the state's regional *rhetoric* at the time, which emphasised endogenous growth and bottom-up initiatives. Similarly to Selstad, Gjertsen identifies two main conflict lines in the Norwegian debate: that between a two (municipality-state) and three (municipality-county-state) level government structure, and that between the older county units and larger, European style regions. As Gjertsen (2005) notes, support for the county structures (as opposed to larger regions) had a relatively strong position in the North Norwegian counties at the time (also Røvik, 2014; Vebostad, 2013). This seems to have influenced the discourse of contestation surrounding the regional reform implemented in 2020.

2.3 Political regionalism

As shown with reference to new regionalism debates in the section above, unpacking the politics of regionalisation processes highlights the role of state actors and geopolitical strategy in the contested production of regional spaces of governance. However, the emphasis on the political nature of these processes, and the role of actors in related practices, also draws attention to the role of 'bottom-up' regionalist ideology and regional identity. In general, regionalism can be understood as the (re)scaling of social and economic interests to a regional scale (Keating and Wilson, 2014). In this sense, regionalism is often associated with a notion of political demands or interests emerging from the 'bottom-up' (Keating, 1997: 18). These definitions do not specify *which* interests or demands are in question, however. Regionalism is therefore sometimes described as a political ideology which can take many different forms (e.g., Newth, 2024; Syssner, 2006).

In the literature, regionalism as ideology, and regional movements or parties, are often dealt with as constituting a spectrum of different positions. This spectrum can for example be related to a peripheral movement's political aspirations, ranging from full integration in a state, to full independence or secession from one (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983). Research on secessionism in for example Catalonia and Scotland (e.g., Bourne, 2014; della Porta and Portos, 2021) highlights the existence of overlaps between regionalism and nationalism in such cases, and have led to debates around alternative terminology such as 'ethno-regionalism' and 'minority nationalism' to describe groups which make claims to a territory based on a distinct ethnic identity (Newth, 2024). In the Western

European context more generally, however, research has tended to emphasise the complementarity between regionalism and nation-building processes from a historical perspective (Storm, 2019). Such complementarity has also been a theme in works on Fenno-Scandinavia (Paasi, 1996), including North Norway (Niemi, 2007; Zachariassen, 2008) – but some significant tensions will be discussed in Chapter 6. Importantly, Keating (1997: 24) highlights, regionalist movements or forms of regionalism always exist in a geographically and historically specific context – sometimes more closely developed "in relation to the state to which their demands were addressed" while at other times more deeply affected by the broader global context.

Regionalist ideology can additionally be placed on spectrums related to its position on social and economic policy, and whether it takes 'inclusive' or 'exclusive' forms (Newth, 2024). Keating (1998), for example, identifies no less than six forms of regionalism, including conservative, progressive, and right-wing populist ones. Moreover, research within the wider literature on populism (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Taggart, 2017) has contributed to unpacking intersections between regionalism, populism, and left- and right-wing ideologies. This literature has, for instance, explored regional patterns of populism (e.g., van Hauwaert et al., 2019), the relationship between regionally uneven development and populism more specifically (e.g., Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Spicer, 2018; cf. Gordon, 2018), as well as the relationship between regionalism and centre-periphery dynamics (e.g., Hijino and Vogt, 2021; Hoi Yu and Kennedy, 2019; McDonnell, 2006; Woods, 1995).

Conceptually, Newth (2019), drawing on Mudde (2007), adopts the term 'populist regionalism' to signal an emphasis on populism as a specific expression of regionalism. Populist regionalism, Newth argues, is usually characterised by regionalism along with nativism and populism. These features have been studied for instance in the case of the Italian Lega Nord, a regionalist political party with dimensions of radical right ideology (Newth, 2019) and cross-border transregional populism (Lamour, 2020). Left-wing populist regionalism, on the other hand, is a lesser explored area of research (Massetti, 2018), perhaps not surprising given overall conceptual disagreements about the meaning of populism as well as the generally pejorative application of the term, especially in the European context (e.g., Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013; Müller, 2015; Stavrakakis, 2017). Studies nonetheless look to for instance the Scottish National Party and the Welsh Plaid Cymru as examples of regionalist parties with populist and left-wing, anti-austerity dimensions (Massetti, 2018). In addition to

regionalist groups' position on social and economic issues, research also considers the absence or presence of nativism as a differentiating factor between left-wing and right-wing populist regionalism (Newth, 2024). In many ways, debates in the literature on regionalism also reflect wide-ranging debates within geographical works on militant particularism, the politics of place, and political mobilisation (e.g., Escobar, 2008; Gibson-Graham, 2016; Harvey, 1995; Massey, 2004).

Altogether, these intersections between regionalism, populism, and mobilisation are important in light of the regional dimensions of prevailing 'geographies of discontent' or 'politics of resentment' (e.g., Agnew, 1995; Leyshon, 2021; McCann, 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; Spicer, 2018; cf. Gordon, 2018; Nurse and Sykes, 2019). They are similarly of significance for understanding the tensions that may appear in the interaction between deeply institutionalised and culturally meaningful (old) regionalisms, and 'top-down' territorial reforms based on (new) regionalist ideals (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013), which has become a central theme in works within new regional geography. Research on contested processes of regional de-institutionalisation, the emergence of resistance identities, and utilisation of strategic essentialism in the context of territorial reforms is an illustration of this (e.g., Frisvoll, 2016; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012, 2017; Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013).

In the literature, similar dynamics have been described as tensions between "centrally orchestrated *regionalization* and demands for a locally rooted *regionalism* more receptive to questions of political participation, citizenship and culture" (Jones and MacLeod, 2004: 434, emphasis in original). Also Keating's (2017: 16) discussion of the contested nature of regions, which highlights how "regions are arenas for playing out some of the most important political issues such as the balance between economic competition and social solidarity", mirrors the same underlying tensions and their potential political and ideological expressions. As MacLeod and Jones (2001: 689-690) contend, such analyses draw attention to not only to the interaction between state-led regionalisation and supportive or obstructive "regionally constituted responses", but furthermore "the multifarious agents that are active in the regionalisation of society and whose spatial matrix of power and political opportunity may extend beyond the boundaries of any ontologically 'existent' region".

2.4 Towards consolidation

This chapter has outlined the distinct but related bodies of literature which this thesis is situated in relation to; theoretically and conceptually drawing on the new regional geography scholarship, and empirically informed by literature on regionalisation and regionalism. The review delineates how the literature on new regional geography has provided a framework for understanding socio-spatial transformations in the past decades, and alongside this, developed theoretically and conceptually as a reflection of such changes.

Returning to the tendency towards a conceptual regional mess highlighted in the introduction of this chapter, researchers have for some time noted a 'mushrooming' of regional concepts and vocabularies in relation to this, signalling both a welcome plurality in regional research but also a detrimental fragmentation of the field (Paasi et al., 2018). This is not a phenomenon unique to this subdiscipline, however; similar trends have also been observed with regard to the fragmented pluralism of economic geographies (Barnes and Sheppard, 2010) and the fractalisation of quantitative geographies (Franklin, 2023), for example. Paasi, Harrison and Jones (2018: 16) consequently argue that

> Rather than being merely beneficial, such fragmentation points towards the need for a more consolidated approach towards regional thinking. The constant quest for new regional theories, concepts and words needs to halt and instead the field be reimagined in ways which allow them – taken to mean both new and existing – to be stress-tested and their explanatory veracity in accounting for the changing geographies of regions and territories.

On the most general level, this thesis should be read as a response to such calls for consolidation. Some more specificity about which aspects of a consolidating agenda this thesis aims to contribute to is warranted, however. One reason for exercising caution about broad calls for consolidating regional geographies is the risk of uncritically combining theoretical approaches without adequately questioning their origins, exclusions, potential contradictions, and implications, a critique that has been raised regarding another attempt to combine heterogenous perspectives (territory, place, scale, network) in a joint framework (Jessop et al., 2008; cf. Casey, 2008; Mayer, 2008; Paasi, 2008; Shapiro, 2008). The same applies to the methodological plurality it calls for. While building bridges between regional approaches may be beneficial, it also risks washing away their ontological and epistemological differences and hence their critical edge. As van Meeteren

(2019: 185) argues in relation to the aspiration to build a multidirectional and inclusionary paradigm of economic geography (cf. Hassink et al., 2019), "it is important to dwell on the epistemological difficulties one encounters when trying to formulate unified paradigms". The history and theoretical influences of new regional geography are, as discussed in this chapter, highly particular ones, which raise questions about to what extent it can avoid constituting an overly homogenising force. Consolidation, moreover, raises questions about which criteria lay the ground for the desired theoretical 'stress-testing', among unresolved debates on for instance generalisation and particularity (e.g., Cox and Evenhuis, 2020).

Another reason for caution is the risk of replicating the very same tendency towards the turnover of academic fashions which the consolidation agenda seeks to avoid. In particular, claims to a 'new' new regional geography (e.g., Jones, 2015, 2022; Paasi et al., 2018) may warrant further evaluation. It is unclear from these works, for example, whether the label applies to the theory of regional institutionalisation itself, which arguably is better placed in the context of other works of new regional geography in the 1980s, to attempts at overcoming binary thinking about territorial and relational dimensions of regions, or to the aim of constructing a more consolidated regional geography. To repurpose Smith's (1988) critique of claims about localism in the 1980s, the question of whether we are observing novel phenomena through the emergence of new regionalism, new city-regionalism, or megaregions that are in need of new explanations, or if they constitute recurring phenomena requiring a longer historical perspective, remain.

That said, this thesis' overarching aim of advancing the current understanding of processes involved in the (re)production of regions is clearly aligned with, and optimistic about, the aim of conceptual consolidation: in particular the "consolidation of regional terminology and conceptual refinement" (Paasi et al., 2018: 17). In doing so, the thesis especially engages with the literature outlined above which addresses the political production, performance, representation, mobilisation, and instrumentalisation of regions (e.g., Boudreau, 2007; Dühr, 2020; Galland and Harrison, 2020; Paasi, 2010; Valler et al., 2023), at the forefront of which are questions about the actors involved, their practices, the efficacy of spatial imaginaries, their materialisation, and the stakes they represent. To this end, the next chapter sketches out the foundations of a conceptual framework for studying regionalisation processes based on the argument that these practices must be situated socially and spatially, and discusses the framework's application to concrete research.

3 Theorising region work

As discussed in the previous chapter in connection with the broader tradition of new regional geography, the institutionalisation of regions has influentially been conceived of as a continuous geo-historical process through which regions gain territorial, symbolic, and institutional shapes, and develop into recognised units within a regional structure and broader social consciousness. Paasi's theory of regional institutionalisation has gained significant traction in following decades; proponents point to its analytically abstract approach and hence versatility as the reason for its continued relevance (e.g., Jones, 2015; MacLeod and Jones, 2001). In the empirical context of this thesis, for instance, it is worth noting that the production of Finnmark and North Norway as regions, as well as the transnational Barents region and the Arctic have all been previously analysed through the lens of regional institutionalisation (e.g., Fitjar, 2013; Niemi, 2007, 2009; Väätänen and Zimmerbauer, 2020; Zimmerbauer, 2013).

Taking its starting point in the regional institutionalisation approach, along with the broader literature on regions, regionalisation, and regionalism presented in the previous chapter, this chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this thesis. As such, the chapter has two interrelated objectives. The first purpose of this chapter is to sketch out a conceptual framework for studying regionalisation processes through engagement with, and further development of, Paasi's (2010) notion of region work. Suggesting that analyses of region work must be situated socially and spatially, I approach region work as a set of socio-spatial practices that may take different *forms* (direct and indirect) and be performed in different *contexts* (formal and informal). Deriving from this conceptualisation, I develop a typology of region work which acts as a heuristic guide for the later analysis (Figure 3.1). The second purpose of this chapter is to further unpack the relationship between practices of region work and processes of regional institutionalisation. To this end, the chapter discusses how the conceptual vocabulary of regional institutionalisation, re-institutionalisation, and de-institutionalisation has been applied in the literature, and suggests why the complementary notion of *counter-institutionalisation* may be better equipped to

capture specific features of the empirical examples of region work addressed in the later chapters – and to illuminate cases of regional contestation more broadly (Table 3.1). First, however, the chapter accounts more generally for the theoretical assumptions that underpin these conceptual proposals.

3.1 Power, stability, change

Drawing on the work of new regional geographers outlined in Chapter 2, regions are understood as continually becoming structures, contingent on geo-historical processes, shaped by relations extending beyond their formal boundaries, and produced by way of people and their practices (which are always situated and hence structured in time and space). Power and power relations naturally emerge as factors with an important influence on institutionalisation processes, including counter-institutionalisation attempts, yet they can be conceptualised in different ways. The purpose of this section is therefore to briefly outline the approach to power adopted in this thesis and to signal some of its implications for actors' engagement in region work.

Some influential accounts of regional institutionalisation place emphasis on power-holding actors in this process (e.g., MacLeod and Jones, 2001; Paasi, 1996). In relation to this, ideology, power, and hegemony emerge as important key words, wherein the "naturalization" and "eternalization" of a region can be understood as ideological strategies (Paasi, 1996: 52). Such a *relational* approach to power, which emphasises one actor's power over another, is clearly useful in analysing the institutionalisation of regions, because it permits a focus on actors' ability to produce a hegemonic discourse supporting specific spatial imaginaries, for instance 'economised' and de-politicised ones (e.g., Moisio and Jonas, 2021). In this context, a relational approach to power specifically indicates power as "an attribute of particular actors and their interactions" rather than power as "a social process of constituting what actors are as social beings, that is, their social identities and capacities" (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 42).

However, while emphasising the role of hegemony in establishing common regional symbols and identity, Paasi (1996: 30) also argues that hegemony is inherently unstable and "always contested". Put in different words, as related socio-spatial approaches to the production of space highlight, hegemonic spaces of representation and spatial practices always exist in relation to everyday representational spaces, which hold potential for contestation and change

(Lefebvre, 1991; also MacLeod and Jones, 2001). In the context of regional institutionalisation, spatial imaginaries are selective in terms of what they rationalise, and are therefore challengeable (Moisio and Jonas, 2021). Transformations of space hence play out as struggles over the conceived, lived, and experienced dimensions of space (Halfacree, 2006).

Alternatively, therefore, power can be approached from a more multidimensional perspective which emphasises that power also has *productive* capacities (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). This moves away from a zero-sum view of power to seeing power as "the production, facilitation or maintenance of particular outcomes, processes, or social relations" in interaction with already existing structures and practices (Cooper, 1994: 452). From this perspective, power is not an attribute but rather something that is exercised, and it does not only have a negative or repressive character. Furthermore, power is understood as decentred, and not something that can be eliminated (ibid: 436 ff).

This perspective is beneficial for appreciating the inherently unstable character of hegemony as well as the contested character of space. A productive view of power, incorporated by the multidimensional approach, highlights that power relations are "negotiated at a local level and can therefore be challenged overtly or covertly", but are still shaped by institutional positions (Mills, 2007: 49). The latter is an important caveat, because in keeping with a critical realist position (Chapter 4), viewing power as ubiquitous risks not accounting for differences in power among actors, and their material effects (ibid). Nonetheless, this approach challenges strong relational understandings of power found in versions of critical discourse analysis (e.g., van Dijk, 2003), which are sometimes critiqued for excessive emphasis on domination and hegemony at the expense of discursive resistance (e.g., Hughes, 2018; Schröter, 2015).

Ultimately, a multidimensional approach does not ontologically privilege a certain view of power (either relational or productive), but understands different conceptualisations of power as inherently "explanatory or normative device[s] that can draw attention to (and create) certain aspects of social relations whilst decentring or ignoring others" (Cooper, 1994: 444). Thus, adopting a multidimensional approach to power allows for an adaptable lens which both acknowledges the productive capacity of power and its implications for 'bottom-up' contestation, while recognising that actors' ability to engage in discursive region work is always influenced by existing power relations.

3.2 Regional institutionalisation as socio-spatial practice

Like different conceptualisations of power, every toolbox of methods and concepts serves to highlight particular dimensions of a phenomena. Paasi's (2010: 2296) call for examining not only the production of regions but importantly, "who or what it is that 'constructs' a region or what this means in practice", subsequently warrants additional tools for analysis. Whereas the existing framework for analysing regional institutionalisation processes provides conceptual abstractions for investigating different dimensions (territorial, symbolic, and so on) of regional production and their forms (for instance borders or place names), it does not to the same extent offer abstractions for directing attention towards the specific *actors* or coalitions of actors involved in said production, their particular *practices*, and finally, their *effects*. As such, in engaging with the notion of region work, where diverse actors are conceived of as regional activists or advocates in their enactment of hard and soft forms of agency (Paasi, 2010), there are opportunities for developing more nuanced and precise analytical and conceptual tools. This is the objective of the remaining part of this chapter.

Returning to Paasi's call to critically examine the 'who' and 'what' of social construction from over a decade ago is a timely exercise because increasing interest in the production of regions, prompted by recent works on state-led city-regionalism and the role of spatial imaginaries in these processes (e.g., Galland and Harrison, 2020; Jonas and Moisio, 2018; Moisio and Jonas, 2021; Valler et al., 2023), places demands on the aforementioned conceptual and methodological tools used for analysis. In spite of this, there has been limited conceptual and methodological development of the notion of region work and its empirical application (cf. Paasi, 2020; Väätänen, 2019; Vangeli, 2020; Zimmerbauer, 2017; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012; Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013).

Reasons for further developing the notion are therefore manifold. Firstly, I contend that elaborating on forms of region work contributes to disentangling the diversity of socio-spatial (including discursive) practices involved in enacting regional spaces. This includes both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' forms of region-building, and the ways in which such 'work' may be enacted in for instance gendered, classed and/or ethnicised ways, and may facilitate different types of inclusionary or exclusionary regionalisms. It also entails more thoroughly unfolding the relationship between region work and the institutionalisation of regions in conceptual terms. Secondly, closer investigation of actors and their

practices contributes to 'situating' or contextualising their region work more visibly. As will be discussed further in Chapter 4, the location from which a discourse (or practice more broadly) originates carries significance, which continues to be relevant to address when approaching the region as both relationally and territorially constituted (e.g., Harrison, 2013). Thirdly, unpacking region work conceptually and empirically offers opportunities for more direct engagement with related approaches, which may methodologically inform analyses of regionalisation processes. Finally, and in relation to the rise of city-regionalism as a spatial solution to the demand for international economic competitiveness in political discourse (Moisio and Jonas, 2021) – what Brenner (2003: 298) once described as "structural and strategic expressions of ongoing, crisis-induced transformations of state spatiality" – analysing (geo)political strategy by way of actors and their practices becomes not just a theoretical but a political imperative.

In expanding the concept of region work into an analytical framework, much can be gained from exploring elements of the so-called practice turn that are compatible with discourse theory, as well as how the notion of 'work' has been drawn on in diverse literatures and disciplines. Calls have, for instance, been made for a return of practice-focus within discourse approaches (Neumann, 2002). The practice turn involves a shift towards approaching text and language as more than discursive – as deeply "entangled in practice" so that for example documents are simultaneously viewed as effects *of* and effects *in* practice; that is, both as constitutive of social practice and as artefacts of it (Weisser, 2014: 47). Practices can hence be understood as mobilising a combination of materials, competences, and meanings, referring to the physical objects and technologies, skills and techniques, and symbolic meanings that practices are constituted by (Shove et al., 2012). Such approaches have furthermore emphasised the importance of the geographical dimensions of social practice, for instance in the realm of formal politics and diplomacy (Jones and Clark, 2015).

Examples of how the notion of work has been applied in ways informed by sociological theory ranges from the scale of the body (e.g., Gimlin, 2007) and social encounters (e.g., Arundale, 2010; Goffman, 1955) to institutions (e.g., Beunen and Patterson, 2019; Lawrence et al., 2013), boundaries (e.g., Lamont and Molnár, 2002), and politics (e.g., Jullien and Smith, 2011). In the context of this thesis, it is particularly valuable to briefly unpack the notion of 'political work' (ibid), because it originates in the sociological institutionalism literature which closely corresponds with the conceptualisation of regional institutionalisation; the

influence of for instance Berger and Luckmann (1966) being evident in both. Moreover, it draws on similar approaches to discourse and problematisation that I outline in more detail in Chapter 4, making it a perspective that can theoretically and conceptually inform further development of the region work notion.

Jullien and Smith (2011: 361), in the context of various industries, define political work as "the constant and key process through which economies are structured and governed". This is put forward by the authors as an intermediary concept to examine the relationship between political action and institutionalisation processes. More specifically, they break political work down into two forms of activity: that of problematisation (the definition of problems in need of specific interventions) and that of legitimation of said problems through either politicisation or technicisation. "Discourse, rhetoric and symbolic action which either calls for change or demands that stasis be maintained" is seen as central to these processes (ibid: 465), but more than that, it also involves related acts of "mobilization, negotiation and alliance building" (ibid: 373). Overall, it is a concept that sensitises analysis to how different values are mobilised by actors to support competing interests.

It is also useful to highlight the body of literature on 'border work' as one which may more empirically inform the notion of region work, given how borders and bordering practices are central to the institutionalisation of a region's territorial dimension (and beyond). In brief, border work scholarship, associated with critical border studies, often focusses on struggles over mobility in the context of migration across national borders (Vammen et al., 2022). From this view, borders need not necessarily be physical, but come into being through bordering practices, and are commonly both 'externalised' and 'internalised' (Collyer, 2020). Best understood as performances which involve a number of rituals that uphold the existence of the border, such a perspective therefore challenges the idea of borders as merely "lines on maps" (Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012: 729).

There are also attempts to move away from state-centric assumptions in border studies, through more 'multiperspectival' approaches (Rumford, 2012). As Newman and Paasi (1998: 200) highlight, borders operate across multiple geographical scales and take various forms, "rang[ing] from the physical and territorial to the social, personal and symbolic". Borders are also highly contextual, and may for example be characterised by cross-border cooperation (Paasi and Prokkola, 2008). Recent scholarship has directed attention to the moral labour of border work, that is, how borders become produced and upheld in relation to societal fears and identified 'enemies' (Richter, 2022), to how border work may

draw on overlapping sectoral logics and practices (Frowd, 2018), and to its expansion, both spatially, in terms of the policy areas it is enacted through, and the technologies it incorporates (Frowd, 2022).

Based on this brief account of how the notion of 'work' has been applied in other contexts, some key takeaways for conceptualising region work as socio-spatial practice can be summarised. The performance of region work is not limited to certain actors or scales but refers to the multiplicity of ways in which regions are enacted and contested in different spaces and institutional settings, mobilising different sets of knowledges and practices. Entailing both discursive and broader social practice, in interaction with material and non-material structures, it is the forms of action through which regions are institutionalised. Reflecting a relational-territorial understanding of regions, region work is equally performed by actors located 'outside' as well as 'inside' the (for example) administrative boundaries of a region, as well as at different points in time. As the following section will address, the socio-spatial context that region work is performed within can furthermore inform us about the means or practices by which actors engage in region work, from legislation and parliamentary debate to obstruction and mobilisation of alternative imaginaries.

3.3 Incorporating socio-spatial context

Having outlined a broad approach to region work as socio-spatial practice, in this section I follow up on work in a recent article and seek to make steps towards its operationalisation as a heuristic framework which facilitates analysis of a variety of institutionalisation practices (Gulbrandsen, 2023). Using Paasi's (2010) distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' region work, or 'institutional advocacy' and 'systematic activism' respectively, as a starting point, I propose the addition of a complementary analytical distinction accounting for formal and informal *contexts of region work*. Paasi's (2010: 2300) distinction, which separates between work for instance "carried out by journalists, entrepreneurs, or teachers" in an institutional rather than individual capacity, and work in the form of "(ethno)regionalist" activism, highlights qualitative differences among practices used to enact regional spaces. However, the categories also contain ambiguities and fuzzy boundaries, as can be read from a more developed definition of the activist and advocate labels:

> The former are individuals or collective agents who visibly and often persuasively struggle for specific regional aims which they either present as 'regional' or which

are generated in a specific regional context. Activists are usually politically active, although they do not always operate through established political structures or parties. […] Advocates, for their part, operate in established institutional positions in a region. Advocacy is thus based on certain subject positions (e.g. civil servants, planners, journalists). […] In some instances, a person can be an activist and an advocate at the same time (e.g. journalists) (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013: 33).

I argue that adopting the additional distinction between *formal and informal contexts of region work* makes a conceptual elaboration at the intersection of socio-spatial context and power, which both have important implications for the efficacy of region work. Its combination with what I, for the sake of precision to avoid confusion with popularly used 'soft' and 'hard' space terminology (e.g., Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2020), henceforth call *direct and indirect forms of region work*, is intended to account more explicitly for both formal or institutional forms of 'activism', and informal or everyday forms of 'advocacy', which takes a back seat in Paasi's original formulation. In this context, the labels 'direct' and 'indirect' distinguish between region work that is explicitly aimed at the production, maintenance, or dismantling of a region, and region work where those outcomes are rather the by-product of institutionalised (or emerging) social practice and discourse, irrespective of the context it takes place within. Unpacking how the context of region work may be conceived of conceptually, however, requires a closer look at the socio-spatiality of region work. Doing this involves the task of 'situating' region work, as highlighted earlier in this chapter.

Grounded in the view that regions are both constituted by and constitutive of discourses and practices, and conversely, that discourse and discursive practices are geographically and historically specific, while also enacting space, this thesis primarily investigates the role and nature of discursive region work. That is not to say that discourse is approached in separation from wider social and material context – as discussed at length in Chapter 4 – but to indicate that the analytical focus and empirical sources are geared towards language and its effects. From this perspective, situating region work becomes a task of unpacking the wider context within which discourses arise – not simply geographically – but in a wider, socio-spatial sense. Based on Giddens' (1984) structuration thinking, which has wielded significant influence within new regional geography in combination with Hägerstrand's (1970) time-geography (cf. Giddens, 1985; Gilbert, 1988; Gregory, 1989; Pudup, 1988), contexts of region work are therefore best understood as continuously becoming structures which offer rules and resources as the basis for action, and which are constituted by relationships and practices beyond the ostensibly immediate 'regional' context. Region work is, in other

words, always performed within contexts that both facilitate and limit actors' room for action; it is "shaped and constrained by social structure in the widest sense and at all levels" (Fairclough, 1992: 64). As Jullien and Smith (2011: 368) argue, actors "cannot simply freely select the meaning they want to give their public declarations and actions: they have to create this meaning by institutionalizing intersubjective linkages between the representations of reality held by individuals and those that are socially shared". The consequence of this is, as Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer (2002: 5) contend from a critical realist position, that "not just anything can be constructed".

Region work is therefore structured by norms, institutions, and power, both in their semiotic and material sense. From this perspective, all practices with a semiotic dimension are associated with particular text genres; for example, (formal) politics can in this line of thinking be understood as "a network of social practices including those associated with activities within political parties, the functioning of parliaments, elections and public spheres in which politicians communicate and interact with citizens" (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 83). These practices are, in turn, associated with particular "forms of argumentation and especially practical argumentation, such as parliamentary debate, political interviews on radio and television, and political speeches" (ibid). As Jensen and Leijon (2000: 191) argue, political discourse is hence not a "neutral medium" but "rather an *institutionalised structure of meanings* that channels political thought and action in certain directions" (emphasis in original). Thus, discursive forms of region work are articulated in relation to particular expectations they may adhere to, but which they can also challenge, since discursive practice draws on structure but is not determined by it (cf. Fairclough, 1992: 58).

Acknowledging these constraints (as well as how context may also facilitate certain forms of region work) can highlight the specificity of practices that become associated with various actors and their region work, contributing to foregrounding the politics of regionalisation processes. Importantly, *access* to different 'communicative events' – be it cabinet meetings or mass media outlets – is itself an effect of power, and plays a role in its reproduction (van Dijk, 2003). This can involve everything from planning and setting the agenda for communicative events, their settings, the rules and norms that determine acceptable discursive practices, and their scope (ibid: 87-88). The question of access to and participation in different contexts of region work is as such also related to how different institutional positions, which assign status within a hierarchy, can influence how effectively power is exercised (Mills, 2007).

Understood in this way, the notion of region work retains its analytical flexibility. As a broad spectrum of practices across different scales, it directs analysis to the diverse but interrelated ways region work is performed. It is at this point I wish to return to the proposed distinction between *formal* and *informal* contexts of region work, so as not to become overly focussed on region work within formal political spaces. Drawing on Painter's (1995) work on the continuum of formal and informal political arenas, and additionally on the way that formal and informal institutions have been conceptualised in other subdisciplines of human geography (e.g., Rekers and Stihl, 2021), such a distinction draws attention to the extent that spaces privilege different actors and practices, and its effects. Rather than suggesting a dichotomous relationship between 'institutional' and 'ordinary' region work, both formal and informal contexts can be understood as equally (but differently) shaped by power relations, normative conventions, and so on; the main difference arising from the degree to which actors' roles, relationships, and discursive practices follow specific conventions (Thornborrow, 2002).

3.4 A typology of region work

Based on the discussion above, I sketch out what the combination of the context and forms of region work may look like and present the resulting heuristic framework as the analytical starting point for this thesis (Figure 3.1). This typology presents a spectrum of region work from *everyday practice* and *institutional advocacy* to *systematic activism* and *institutional activism*.

As previously discussed, *institutional advocacy* originally refers to indirect forms of region work which may be channelled through professions such as journalism and teaching. In this view, a significant part of region work belongs to the category of "mundane practices and networks rather than explicit 'construction'", which may also be "more influential than the hard work, because it is reproduced through innumerable institutions" (Paasi, 2010: 2300). From this perspective, therefore, institutional advocacy as a form of region work is primarily enacted through institutionalised practices in established institutions such as schools and the media, not based solely on individual actors. As Zimmerbauer, Suutari, and Saartenoja (2012: 1067) define it, advocacy involves "certain institutionalized subject positions that entail continuity, so that even if the actors as such change, the advocacy will be continued by another person holding the same position". Nonetheless, there is a degree of ambiguity associated with the term 'advocacy'

and whether it can be interpreted as covering both the indirect reproduction of regions through institutions and more direct forms of region work bordering on systematic activism, though channelled through the same kinds of institutions. It is a matter of interpretation, for example, whether popular representations of a region in the media – such as those discussed by for example Eriksson (2008) – are considered direct or indirect region work (or likely something in-between). The same ambiguity applies to the kind of academic region work performed in works of regional history (cf. Hundstad, 2012) or within the pages of this thesis; a product of my individual positionality as a Norwegian, yet an 'outsider' to the case study region in question, as well as institutional and discursive conventions of academic practice, addressed in Chapter 5.

In contrast to institutional advocacy, *systematic activism* originally refers to direct region work related to for instance ethnic regionalism, and as such it implies explicit construction attempts (Paasi, 2010). However, as with the term 'advocacy', 'activism' comes with certain ambiguities. Initially, it triggers association with practices related to social movements and informal political arenas, but it is not limited to it. As Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013: 33) clarify, activists often engage in explicitly political region work, but not necessarily through political parties or other formal political structures. As Painter (1995: 151) states more broadly, however, groups "often seek political change at least partly through the formal institutions of government and the state". Direct region work, in this sense, is therefore situated across a continuum of formal and informal arenas, and can take on highly formalised as well as informal and decentralised forms.

As I have highlighted in the preceding discussion, the ambiguities contained within the notions of direct and indirect region work offer significant flexibility, and as such, they function as heuristic concepts to facilitate analysis of regional institutionalisation processes. A downside of this, however, is that excessive ambiguity creates fuzzy areas which hinder the possibility of being more precise about the nuances of region work. Additionally, conceptualising region work only in terms of agency risks slipping into voluntarism if not anchored adequately within wider social context, therefore failing to provide more comprehensive accounts of how such practices operate (cf. Sayer, 2000: 27). There is a risk that works that call for critical examination of for instance state-led region-building efforts suffer analytically if they fail to acknowledge this. My intention with outlining two further dimensions of region work is therefore to reinsert structure into the framework itself, and to explicate cases where different forms of agency

overlap or 'fuse' in the framework (cf. Paasi, 2010), summarised in Figure 3.1. Specifically, I introduce formal and informal contexts of region work as a step towards resolving some of the ambiguities of the forms of region work already described above, by hereafter defining *institutional advocacy* as indirect region work performed in more 'formal' contexts, and *systematic activism* as direct region work in more 'informal' contexts. Below, I sketch out their counterparts.
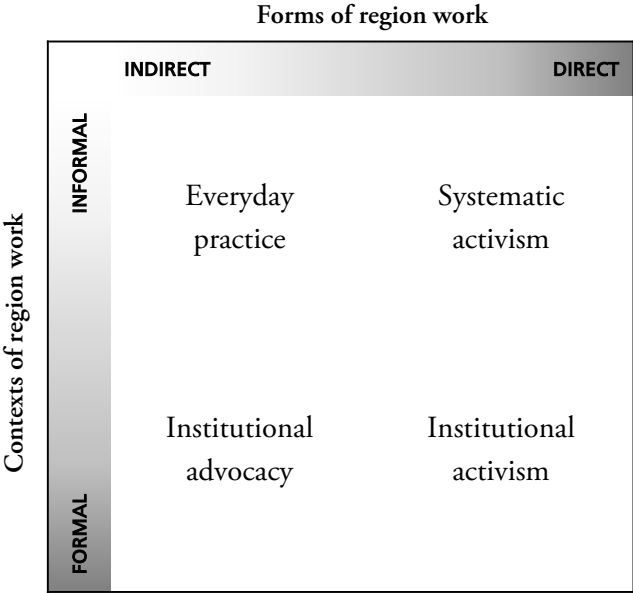
Forms of region work

Figure 3.1 A typology of region work
Developed from Gulbrandsen (2023)

The notion of *institutional activism* hence refers to forms of direct region work performed within more formal contexts, which includes, but is not limited to, the formalisation of regionalist movements within the formal political arena (cf. Painter, 1995). This would be the case with the emergence of regionalist parties, as discussed by for instance Rokkan and Urwin (1983). Beyond this, however, institutional activism can also be associated with other kinds of active regional production, as seen in the geopolitical strategy of states (e.g., Jonas, 2013), strategic spatial planning (Grundel, 2014), and place branding efforts (e.g., Frisvoll & Rye, 2009; Willett, 2016), which position regional identity as a form of 'political capital' utilised in regional development contexts (Baldersheim, 2003: 295). Conceived this way, institutional activism in particular intersects with

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notions such as (state-led) region-building within, beyond, and across state borders (e.g., Browning, 2003; Calleya, 2009; Delcour and Wolczuk, 2017; Gaberell and Debarbieux, 2014; García-Álvarez and Trillo-Santamaría, 2013; Keskitalo, 2007; Levine and Nagar, 2016; Luo et al., 2010; Neumann, 1994; Zimmerbauer, 2016), encompassing both its institution- and community-building dimensions (Syssner, 2006: 30-31).

Finally, *everyday practice* is adopted to refer to forms of indirect region work within more informal contexts. Such forms of socio-spatial practice relate to a vast body of research on everyday, affective and embodied practices in the production of space and identity, as exemplified by works of feminist political geographers (e.g., Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Medby, 2018; Militz & Schurr, 2016), and works on 'banal nationalism' (e.g., Antonsich, 2016; Billig, 1996; Paasi, 2016), everyday practices and the state (e.g., Painter, 2006), and mundane digital spaces (e.g., Leszczynski, 2020).

The analytical typology I have presented above, best imagined as a spectrum in practice, hints at the broad variety of region work performed by different actors. As such, it is not meant to imply that analytically separating between four types of region work is anything near straightforward (or even necessarily desirable). While there *may* be some 'clear' cases of specific types of region work, in most instances there are likely to be overlaps, as for instance explored in Chapter 7 on the Norwegian government's use of institutional activism and advocacy in making a case for regional mergers. As such, region work is in this thesis approached as both the patterns of social-spatial practice that continually 'maintain' a region in terms of for example functional patterns, but also as the practices that are aimed at intentionally (re)producing the region according to various interests. These practices can take place within a range of contexts, carrying implications for the shape they take, which actors engage in them, and their efficacy.

Moreover, as scholarship on social practice emphasises, region work – depending on one's scale of analysis – is not necessarily one 'practice' in itself, but rather comprised of a 'bundle' or 'complex' of related practices (Shove et al., 2012) that are geographically and historically contingent. As such, analysing the intersections of region work becomes important; highlighting how practices are contextual and may be carried out differently in various settings. Moreover, approaching the institutionalisation of regions through the notion of region work has implications for choice of methodology and empirical material, since analysing different forms and contexts of region work may require different vantage points.

3.5 Institutionalisation and counter-institutionalisation

What remains to be addressed is the conceptual link between the expanded typology of region work presented above and its implications for a region's formation and transformation; a question of connecting actors' performance of region work to its outcomes. This necessitates a brief unpacking of how the conceptual vocabulary of regional institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation, and re-institutionalisation is utilised in this literature. Following this, I discuss why these terms alone insufficiently address important dimensions of the case study in this thesis, and propose that the notion of *counter-institutionalisation* may bring further nuance to this terminology. A summary of this elaboration is presented in Table 3.1, where the first three definitions synthesise already established understandings of the terms in question, while the final definition is constructed from the subsequent discussion of counter-discourse and resistance below.

Table 3.1 Definition of terms

TERM	DEFINITION	REFERENCES
Regional institutionalisation	The contested and unfinished socio-spatial process through which a spatial unit becomes part of a regional structure and recognisable in the wider social consciousness, acquiring a stable presence through its materialisation in material and non-material structures and practices in and beyond the region	Paasi (1986) Paasi (1991) Metzger (2013)
Regional de-institutionalisation	The closely interlinked process through which some dimensions of a region may be partially erased or transformed, while others may persist; the region eventually becoming replaced by or subsumed in emerging spatial assemblages	Paasi (1996) Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013) Zimmerbauer et al. (2017) Jones (2022)
Regional re-institutionalisation	The process through which a region in its course of reproduction is gradually transformed by being subject to contestation, power struggles, and changing external and internal factors, yet its territorial shape or absolute spatial extent may persist over time	Frisvoll (2016) Yamazaki (2018) Väätänen and Zimmerbauer (2020)
Regional counter-institutionalisation	The process through which actors attempt to denaturalise or deconstruct a dominant regional representation, for instance through mobilisation or revitalisation of extant regional symbols, or through the generation or promotion of new regional imaginaries, limited to neither inclusionary nor exclusionary regionalisms	Terdiman (1985) Moussa and Scapp (1996) Zimmerbauer et al. (2012) Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013)

The terminology of regional institutionalisation

The process of regional *institutionalisation* is originally defined by Paasi (1986: 121) as "a socio-spatial process during which some territorial unit emerges as a part of the spatial structure of a society and becomes established and clearly identified in different spheres of social action and social consciousness". As outlined in the previous chapter, the institutionalisation process can be understood as taking place though analytically distinct stages regarding a region's development of a territorial, symbolic, and institutional character, and finally, its more 'permanent' establishment. This, however, does not equate the process of regional institutionalisation to the emergence of a region's administrative shape: though this can be one aspect of its formal institutionalisation, it is "not necessarily the most notable or most effective step as regards [its] social reproduction" (ibid: 130). Overall, Paasi (1991: 243) specifies, the process of regional institutionalisation is "a manifestation of the goals established by local or nonlocal actors and organisations and the decisions made by them". Specifically, a region's establishment continues to be upheld through social practice in different spheres of society and is not limited to the region itself but takes place at various spatial scales and at different points in time (ibid: 244).

Other accounts of regional institutionalisation have more explicitly unpacked the materiality of these processes. Specifically, Metzger (2013: 1375) argues for an understanding of regional institutionalisation as "the process through which propositions for regionalization are increasingly stabilized through delegation into more durable socio-material forms than discourse" such as "organizations, transport links, legal status" and so on. This bears similarity to how for instance Hägerstrand (1970) has discussed the stability and lifespan of spatial structures in terms of its encoding and materialisation in legislation and physical space. Metzger (2013: 1381) suggests that the process of regional institutionalisation as such "occur[s] through the formalization of organizations and political-administrative units or through the construction of physical infrastructure or other durable land-use developments that materially locks down or 'hard-wires' the recurrent and stable enactment of the proposition for regionalization into the fabric of various broad aspects of everyday life". Summarising this, a region's institutionalisation can be understood as a contested and unfinished socio-spatial process by which a spatial unit becomes part of a regional structure and recognisable in the wider social consciousness, acquiring a stable presence through its manifestation in material and non-material structures and practices in and beyond the region.

The related notion of a region's *de-institutionalisation* has, as Zimmerbauer, Riukulehto, and Suutari (2017: 680) note, for a long time remained under-conceptualised, sometimes simply understood as "reversed institutionalization or a process of softening a hard space", that is, a region's existence gradually reverting to inexistence, or a region losing its administrative boundaries and functions. Instead, they propose that de-institutionalisation should be understood as "restructuration, in which some of the institutional basis is diminished (through events and conjunctures)" but where "regions are still 'thick with things' that are material and nonmaterial and contribute to regional identity" (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017: 690). Regions, if defined in terms of their 'plasticity' as Jones (2022: 51) proposes, can therefore be understood as characterised by the tension that arises between their "openness to transformation" on the one hand and their "tendency to retain [their] current form" on the other. De-institutionalisation can hence be understood as a process through which a region no longer has a formal status, but still retains a presence in the social consciousness through the persistence of symbols and institutions (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013: 31).

Alternatively, it would also be possible to imagine the opposite to take place, wherein a region retains an administrative and legal function but becomes symbolically hollowed out and replaced by other points of for instance cultural identification. Overall, the key point from Zimmerbauer, Riukulehto and Suutari's (2017: 690) discussion of regional de-institutionalisation is that the process remains incomplete because regions are maintained in their "extensive and entrenched sociocultural distribution": they remain 'sticky' and 'thick with things' and lay the ground from which new regional assemblages may appear. As such, regional de-institutionalisation can be conceived of as a process that is closely interlinked with regional institutionalisation (Paasi, 1996: 37), whereby some dimensions of a region may be partially erased or transformed, while others may persist; the region eventually becoming replaced by or subsumed in emerging spatial assemblages.

The term regional *re-institutionalisation*, in contrast, has seemingly not received equivalent attempts at conceptualisation; the term is scarcely used in the literature, and is mostly adopted without clear definition. In what follows, I will therefore unpack some examples of the term's usage. The 're'-prefix is generally taken to imply both backward movement and repetition. Both meanings are present in different uses of the notion of regional re-institutionalisation. In a case study of a Finnish municipal merger, for example, Zimmerbauer, Suutari, and Saartenoja (2012) use the term in the former sense (backward movement), referring to

regional activists' mobilisation of regional symbols in opposition to said merger, in an attempt to 'revert' the region to its prior state. As such, re-institutionalisation becomes indirectly defined as de-institutionalisation's counter-point, capturing active resistance to for example mergers: it is "seen to nurture the threatened regional identity and contradict the deinstitutionalization" (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017: 686). The authors argue that the efficacy of such re-institutionalisation discourses, however, may be weakened due to the changed institutional position of the actors in question (ibid: 690).

In contrast, an example of the notion of re-institutionalisation being used in the latter sense (repetition) can be found in a more recent case study on supranational Arctic region-building. In their study, Väätänen and Zimmerbauer (2020) examine how states that are not part of the Arctic Council's eight 'Arctic states' have repositioned themselves and consequently attempted to re-institutionalise the Arctic in more relational, as opposed to territorial, terms. The authors describe this as a process in which "the region as a distinct territorial space is being reproduced but simultaneously 'stretched' (or 'expanded') and reconstituted as well", resulting in its re-institutionalisation over time (ibid: 385). Another informative case study in this vein addresses the geo-historical development of regional and national identities in a peripheral island region of Japan. Yamazaki (2018) shows how after periods in which national identity was imposed on the region – and instrumentalised by its inhabitants in resistance to the United States' presence after the Second World War – regional identity was subsequently promoted by reformist groupings. More recently, however, the island region has become re-institutionalised as a national borderland, legitimised both by external threats and internal economic considerations, Yamazaki argues.

As in the Arctic example, the meaning of re-institutionalisation here can be considered more closely related to the latter definition (repetition) in terms of the more gradual and centrally managed processes it implies. Moreover, what these two examples have in common is that they imply a 'relational' regional transformation, but not necessarily a transformation of the region's 'absolute' spatial extent, to draw on Harvey's (2006) terminology. This, however, is the case in the former application (backward movement), where absolute space and territorial boundaries arise as central points of contestation during a merger because the initial de-institutionalisation that set in motion the re-institutionalisation attempt involves a process of territorial rescaling which in concrete terms may involve losing local control of communal assets and decision making (Frisvoll, 2016). This is because rescaling processes, be it in the context

of regional mergers or reforms in other public institutions, contribute to some actors being empowered and others disempowered by emerging scalar arrangements of government, which may threaten vested interests (Madsen, 2022).

Altogether, then, two conceptions of regional re-institutionalisation processes emerge from the literature. One involves a 'return' to a previously institutionalised region, or to be more precise, an actor's idealised discursive representation of a regional unit at a certain point in time. This form of re-institutionalisation is understood as originating from 'within' the region itself, to be triggered by a formal de-institutionalisation process initiated by the state, and hence as being reactive in character. Regaining control of regional assets and institutions emerge as central stakes in the re-institutionalisation attempt. The other, and arguably more general and widely applicable, conception of regional re-institutionalisation is more closely related to the process of a region's continual reproduction, wherein its stability is always subject to contestation, power struggles, and competing interests. It appears as a process that may be, but is not necessarily, more 'top-down' in character, gradually enacted through both institutional activism and advocacy, and as a response to changing external and internal factors. Moreover, it is primarily the non-material, relational dimensions of the region that are transformed, and as such its significance in the wider social consciousness, rather than its territorial shape or absolute spatial extent.

Conceptualising counter-institutionalisation

Given the nature of the case study adopted in this thesis – involving a contested regional merger and attempts to reverse it – it is not surprising that the analysis in Chapters 8 and 9 most closely relates to the former definition of regional re-institutionalisation identified above (backward movement). Yet because the concept has not yet been thoroughly theorised, and because existing applications primarily emphasise its backward- and inward-looking form, my assessment throughout the process of analysis has been that it insufficiently captures the more nuanced and much broader scope of action and discourse that these actors' region work involves. It is on this basis I argue that closer conceptualisation of such processes would be analytically beneficial. Specifically, I suggest that the notion of *counter-institutionalisation* may capture a greater variety of processes, while also contributing to a clearer distinction between counter-institutionalisation and the latter definition of re-institutionalisation (repetition).

To begin to think of regional counter-institutionalisation as a distinct process, it is helpful to examine how counter-*discourse* has been theorised elsewhere, seeing how discourse and discursive practice is understood in this thesis as having a central role in the institutionalisation of regions (Chapter 4). One starting point can be found in Terdiman's (1985: 149) definition, which maintains that counter-discourse should be thought of as not merely opposition to a dominant discourse on the surface level, but as something beyond this:

> Counter-discourses function in their form. Their object is to represent the world *differently*. But their projection of difference goes beyond simply contradicting the dominant, beyond simply negating its assertions. The power of a dominant discourse lies in the codes by which it regulates understanding of the social world. Counter-discourses seek to detect and map such naturalized protocols and to project their subversion. At stake in this discursive struggle are the paradigms of social representation themselves (emphasis in original).

As such, Terdiman (1985: 199) argues, a counter-discourse "asserts alternative structures for conceiving the real in the expectation – however naively hopeful – that their intervention will induce some fissure or slippage in the apparent seamlessness and solidity of the dominant". The possibility for counter-discourse, in other words, does from this perspective emerge from and result in the inability of dominant discourses to achieve stable hegemony (ibid: 56).

Moussa and Scapp (1996) provide a related account of counter-discourse. In their words, counter-discourse emerges in spaces where "the formerly voiceless might begin to articulate their desires – to *counter* the domination of prevailing authoritative discourses", as such constituting "a practical engagement in political struggles" which emerges from below (ibid: 88-89, emphasis in original). Importantly, however, Moussa and Scapp (1996: 92) stress that while a counter-discourse "is *always* political – political, we are suggesting, by definition – *[it is] not necessarily progressive or liberating*", and can over time transform into a dominant discourse itself (ibid: 92, emphasis in original). What defines a counter-discourse is therefore not its substantive content, but its relation of contestation and deconstruction to a dominant discourse.

Beginning to conceive of regional counter-institutionalisation from this understanding of counter-discourse and its role enables an engagement with what Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013) identify as 'resistance identities' in the context of a rural-urban municipal merger (also Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). Resistance identities are here understood as "an opposite force to the power practiced by

regional authorities and central administration" which "strives to challenge the hegemonic power and opposes top-down policymaking and control" (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013: 33). The authors specifically connect resistance identity with regional activism – direct region work – that is opposed to new regionalist projects and rather seeks to reproduce the region as a space of (old) regionalism. They find that particularly local service provision and local democracy are central issues raised by opponents of the merger the given case (ibid: 36).

The dynamics of this case has parallels to the resistance against the Troms-Finnmark merger which I discuss in Chapter 8. Specifically, as I argue later, resistance against the merger between Troms and Finnmark counties became embedded in, and drew upon, an at the time highly salient counter-discourse of centre-periphery contestation. This discourse also had connections to a recent North Norway 'rebellion', as hinted at in Chapter 1, which nonetheless has a longer history: as Zachariassen (2008) argues, North Norwegian region-building and regional identity has at different points in time constituted a counter-hegemonic project in itself (Chapter 6).

Conceiving of these cases of resistance to formal de-institutionalisation through amalgamation as examples of *counter-institutionalisation* hence contributes to placing analytical emphasis on the rationales, knowledges, and political positions that underpin these actors' claims, which may not be immediately visible but are identifiable through examination of their counter-discourse and its interdiscursive dimensions. Following from this discussion, I therefore approach counter-institutionalisation in this thesis as a process through which actors attempt to denaturalise or deconstruct a dominant regional representation, for instance through mobilisation or revitalisation of extant regional symbols, or through the generation or promotion of new regional imaginaries, limited neither to inclusionary nor exclusionary regionalisms.

In summary, this chapter has presented two interrelated arguments. Firstly, I have made the case for conceptually developing the notion of region work, arguing that approaching region work in terms of both its direct and indirect forms and its formal and informal contexts facilitates a multidimensional understanding of actors' discourses and practices. Region work is therefore approached in this thesis as patterns or acts of socio-spatial practice that contribute to a region's (re)production; enacted and contested in different contexts and mobilising different discursive resources. By drawing attention to how actors are both enabled and limited in their enactment of regional space, more nuanced insights can be

gained about how actors exercise power in different institutional settings, and its implications for the efficacy of their region work. From *systematic* and *institutional activism* to *institutional advocacy* and more *everyday practices*, the typology of region work outlined in Section 3.4 hence provides the foundations of the conceptual framework for the later analytical chapters of this thesis. Secondly, I have addressed the relative absence of conceptual engagement with regional re-institutionalisation in the literature and proposed, both informed by the later analysis and the theoretical literature on counter-discourse and resistance identities, that the notion of *counter-institutionalisation* can offer an avenue for analysing region work as active opposition to de-institutionalisation. The chapter that follows touches on the role of discourse and discursive practice in these processes in more depth.

4 Region work as discursive practice

In the previous chapter, I proposed an approach to analysing regional institutionalisation processes based on examining various forms of *region work*. Region work, approached in this thesis as bundles of practices and discourses performed by a variety of actors in different contexts (from formal to informal) and in different forms (direct and indirect), is therefore best understood as taking place across a broad spectrum of socio-spatial practice. This chapter develops this analytical framework by further unpacking its theoretical-methodological underpinnings and implications. In specific, the chapter outlines the approach to discourse and discourse analysis adopted in this thesis, and hence makes a case for analysing the discursive dimensions of region work. I do this by first discussing textual approaches in human geography more generally, before outlining the form of critical discourse analysis applied in this thesis, including its epistemological and ontological foundations. With reference to debates in socio-spatial theory, I subsequently discuss the spatiality of discourse in terms of its *spatialisation* and *spatialising effects*. The purpose of this discussion is to further elaborate on the relationship between discursive practices of region work and the institutionalisation, de-institutionalisation, re-institutionalisation, and counter-institutionalisation of regions, discussed at the end of the previous chapter.

4.1 A case for analysing language

Forms of text analysis are well established in the discipline of human geography. The academic occupation with for instance geopolitical texts (Sharp, 1993) and imaginations (Häkli, 1998), dissident geographs (Dalby, 1993), scripts (Ó Tuathail, 1992), geopolitical reasoning (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992), social representations of space (Halfacree, 1993), the discursive construction of boundaries (Paasi, 1999), as well as disciplinary discourses and practices (Schoenberger, 1998) certainly flourished at the turn of the century, a result of the so-called discursive or cultural turn (Dittmer, 2010). Variations of text

analysis have for instance proliferated in studies of regions, regionalisation and region-building on both sub-national and supra-national scales, approached from perspectives such as discourse analysis, language-games, speech acts, narratives, and frame theory (e.g., Fitjar, 2013; Frisvoll and Rye, 2009; Keskitalo, 2007, 2015; Lysgård, 2001; Medby, 2019; Pincus and Ali, 2016; Väätänen and Zimmerbauer, 2020).

Within the broader field of text-based analysis, discourse approaches seek to highlight the contingency of the social world; uncovering how discursive representations, once established as common-sensical and natural, enable and constrain certain forms of action (be it policy or everyday practice) (Hacking, 1999). In Fairclough's (1992: 64) words,

> Discourse contributes to the constitution of all those dimensions of social structure which directly or indirectly shape and constrain it: its own norms and conventions, as well as the relations, identities and institutions which lie behind them. Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning.

Understanding political practice as gaining meaning through discourse, an examination of language in use, such as political speeches, hence allows us to better "understand the social construction of worlds and the role of geographical knowledge in that social construction" (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992: 191). Discourse analysis is therefore a strategy for examining text, understood as "the linguistic/semiotic elements of social events"; that is, a part of social processes that can be isolated analytically (Fairclough, 2005: 916).

The widespread use of discourse approaches means that to acknowledge the importance of language in social processes is no longer particularly controversial (Medby, 2020). That is not to say that discourse analysis does not have its critics – especially a concern with certain versions of it, such as what Neumann (2002: 628) brands as 'armchair analysis': "text-based analyses […] that are not complemented by different kinds of contextual data from the field". Similar concerns have been raised by feminist geographers, who call for textual analyses to be conducted "in a broader way that is less dominated by representation and more attuned to actual practices", including attention to its everyday and embodied nature (Dowler and Sharp, 2001: 169; Sharp, 2021). Feminist geographers also point to the limited repertoire of critique available within traditional approaches to text-based analysis (Sharp, 2000). More fundamental critiques of textual approaches have been offered by for instance non-

representational theory (e.g., Thrift, 2007), though others argue that this is based on a degree of misrepresentation of how past geographers have theorised and analysed representations (e.g., Cresswell, 2012: 100).

Despite such critiques, however, there are many reasons for continuing to make use of textual approaches. Language, being a medium through which we make sense of the world, is a crucial dimension of social practice. This implies that all events are 'textual' to different extents – some may be highly semiotic (while still "co-produced by mental, social and material as well as specifically semiotic structures") while other may be mostly non-semiotic (Fairclough et al., 2002: 6). Thus, while the social world is material it is also heavily textual, and arguably, more so now than ever (Weisser, 2014). The dawn of the so-called information age (Castells, 1996) and the proliferation of data and new media it entails consequently have implications for discursive practices; for the production, distribution and consumption of text, including the practices of social movements (e.g., Loader, 2008).

Moreover, in calling for a "return to language" which goal should be "to bring past insights into conversations with the present", Medby (2020: 152-153) makes the case for understanding language in relation to "the embodied, affective, and technological" – on the whole, a 'more-than-representational' way of approaching language (Lorimer, 2005; Sharp, 2021). Such a reorientation of textual approaches can take many forms. In recent works on the institutionalisation of regions and their mobilisation in political and planning discourse, for instance, analyses of visual representations have become common (e.g., Dühr, 2007, 2020; Gaberell and Debarbieux, 2014; Zonneveld, 2021), reflecting in part the recent preoccupation with regional design (Neuman and Zonneveld, 2021) and attempts to foster comparative analytical strategies (Harrison and Gu, 2021). Scholars have also suggested that spatial imaginaries are better approached as performative rather than purely representational discourses (Watkins, 2015).

Consequently, it is important to recognise that there is not one, but multiple traditions of discourse analysis, which have different theoretical roots and methodological implications (Lees, 2004), for instance regarding the degree to which they are attuned to the role of practices. As Neumann (2002) argues, discourse analysis has always, at its best, been concerned with social practice. The Fairclough-inspired take on critical discourse analysis applied in this thesis specifically insists on an understanding of discourse as constituting a form of social practice: "a mode of action, one form in which people may act upon the world and especially upon each other, as well as a mode of representation" (Fairclough,

1992: 63). It also entails a moderate rather than strong constructionist stance, in which the "*relations between* linguistic/semiotic elements of the social and other (including material) elements" are centred (Fairclough, 2005: 916, emphasis in original). On this basis, I therefore take a position similar to Neumann (2002) and Jones and Clark (2015) who argue for a combined focus on *representations* and the role of socio-spatial *practices* in the (re)production of these representations when approaching region work theoretically and empirically. These features are closely aligned with assumptions of critical realist forms of discourse analysis and its view of semiosis.

4.2 Approach to discourse analysis

To further elaborate the approach to discourse analysis adopted in this thesis, this section provides a brief reflection on critical realist philosophy of science and the ontological and epistemological ways in which it underpins critical realist forms of text-based analysis. The strand of critical realism which I present below draws primarily on Sayer's (2000) work on critical realist human geography, but is also informed by feminist epistemological interventions (e.g., Albert et al., 2020; Harding, 2003; Peter, 2003). More generally, this reflection also makes explicit some of the assumptions underlying much of the theoretical and conceptual literature I have drawn on in the previous chapters, given the influence of critical realism on the emergence of new regional geography in the 1980s (Chapter 2). While some have questioned the relevance of critical realism for contemporary debates (Cox, 2013; cf. Pratt, 2013; Sayer, 2013; Yeung, 2023), I believe that its close relationship to the origin of both the concepts and approaches I engage with in this thesis speaks to the necessity of unpacking its theoretical and methodological implications. The more practical consequences of this approach for my analytical strategies and selection of empirical material are discussed in Chapter 5.

Critical realism is a stratified ontology which distinguishes between objects and structures with causal powers or potentials, the events that take place when such powers are activated, and our limited experience and fallible knowledge of these objects, structures, and events (Sayer, 2000). In so doing, critical realism makes a claim to a reality that exists (largely) independently of our knowledge of it (Sayer and Morgan, 2022), and consequently, it has been described as an "ontologically bold and epistemologically cautious" approach (Outhwaite, 1987: 34). Its

'ontological boldness' stems from critical realism's claim to an independent reality and its view that "this reality is made up of causal powers, mechanisms, structures, systems, processes, circuits, etc, which is behind the world as we can perceive it", while its 'epistemological cautiousness' or modesty stems from the view that "our ability to know about this reality is problematic", making generalisation difficult but not an impossibility (Cox and Evenhuis, 2020: 432-433). As Sayer (1984: 213) contends, there are both epistemological and ontological reasons for adopting this cautious stance to knowledge:

> *Any* explanation, be it of natural or social phenomena, is incomplete for the epistemological reason that all knowledge is revisable, but explanations of social phenomena are also incomplete for the ontological reasons […] that the objects of study are undergoing continuous historical, and not merely evolutionary, change (emphasis in original).

Some feminist scholars take the argument further than this, critiquing strands of critical realism for its epistemological naivety about the situated production of knowledge (e.g., Harding, 2003; Peter, 2003). As Albert, Brundage, Sweet, and Vandenberghe (2020: 358) argue,

> While it is indeed the case that all knowledge is fallible, it is also the case that all knowledge is *positioned*: it has a particular standpoint. What is more, the social power relations between standpoints organize the production of truth in ways that produce systematic distortions of reality (ideology) (emphasis in original).

From this perspective, admissions of the partiality of knowledge is not "a necessary evil", but rather a fundamental "scientific and epistemological resource" (Harding, 2003: 153; also Haraway, 1988). The cautious approach to knowledge claims espoused by critical realists does not, however, amount to a relativist position. For critical realists, truth is understood in terms of its 'practical adequacy', meaning "the extent to which it generates expectations about the world and about results of our actions which are realized" at specific times and in specific contexts (Sayer, 2000: 43).

This has implications for how critical realism itself should be applied in research; as Cruickshank (2002: 94) argues, not as a definitive ontology where its concepts claim to directly mirror reality, but rather as a 'philosophical underlabourer' for critical and emancipatory social sciences as intended by Bhaskar (1989). Critical realist ontology does so by providing a framework for approaching causation and explanation in the 'open system' context of social research without either denying

its possibility or equating causation and explanation with regularity. Instead, critical realism offers a model of causation which accounts for the complexity of causal relationships; acknowledging that the world "has ontological depth" in which "events arise from the workings of mechanisms which derive from the structure of objects, and [...] take place within geo-historical contexts" (Sayer, 2000: 15). Multiple outcomes are therefore always possible effects of one causal power, the same way that several mechanisms can result in the same outcome. This account of causation is furthermore related to the critical realist view of emergence, which holds that the properties of new phenomena are "irreducible to those of their constituents, even though the latter are necessary for their existence" (ibid: 12).

As such, while providing philosophically grounded methodological guidelines, critical realism is not a method in itself (Yeung, 1997). It is compatible with a range of methods, calling for "abstraction and careful conceptualisation" in combination with concrete, empirical research (Sayer, 2000: 19). 'Intensive' research designs, which goals are causal explanation of mechanisms within specific contexts rather than representative generalisation of statistical relationships, are central to this (ibid: 20-22). While this thesis draws on critical realist ontology and epistemology, however, I do not fully adopt a research design of this kind. Rather, as I outline here and in the following chapter, my research design is more specifically geared towards *critical discourse analysis*, which incorporates a critical realist stance but necessitates particular types of empirical sources, research methods, and analytical emphasis.

Critical discourse analysis, as a theoretical and methodological 'package' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), has many similarities with critical realism and has to some extent developed alongside it. At its core, it approaches discourse from "an analytically dualist epistemology which gives primacy to researching relations between agency [...] and structure on the basis of a realist social ontology" (Fairclough, 2005: 916). It is therefore oriented towards critical realist questions around the identification of mechanisms and specifically the role of semiosis – meaning making – in social structuration; what Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2002: 5) describe as processes "involved in the variation, selection and retention of the semiotic and extra-semiotic features of any social phenomenon". As such, its critical realist foundations provide this form of discourse analysis with an explanatory dimension which is neither possible nor desirable from more poststructuralist standpoints (Rose, 2001: 139). Altogether, critical discourse analysis advocates a dialectical understanding of discourse and social structure,

suggesting that "the discursive constitution of society does not emanate from a free play of ideas […] but from a social practice which is firmly rooted in and oriented to real, material social structures" (Fairclough, 1992: 66). Emerging from this approach is consequently the view that

> Because texts are both socially-structuring and socially-structured, we must examine *not only how texts generate meaning* and thereby help to generate social structure but also *how the production of meaning is itself constrained* by emergent, non-semiotic features of social structure" (Fairclough et al., 2002: 3-4, emphasis added).

This understanding of discourse relates back to the conceptualisation of region work in Chapter 3 as practices shaped by the different forms they take and the different socio-spatial contexts they are performed within. Discursive region work, as such, is constitutive but inevitably also socio-spatially constituted.

Critical discourse analysis' realist account of emergence is another way in which it differs from strong constructionist approaches to discourse. Specifically, critical discourse analysis pays substantial attention to the aforementioned constraints within which meaning is produced, rather than "emphasising the endless possibilities for meanings to emerge from the play of difference" (Fairclough et al., 2002: 7). As such, it views language as highly structured; "shaped by relations of power and ideologies", but also as having inherent capacity for change (Fairclough, 1992: 12). On this basis, critical discourse analysis provides tools for examining both cases of social reproduction and of the particular conditions for contestation (counter-discourse) and consequently discourse innovation, for example through intertextual relations, as well as relations between discourse and wider social and material context (Fairclough et al., 2002).

There are nonetheless clear affinities between Fairclough-inspired approaches and, for instance, Foucauldian discourse analysis; in fact, critical discourse analysis was initially formulated in conversation with such insights to redress the lack of engagement with social theory in linguistic approaches to discourse (Fairclough, 1992: 37 ff). For Fairclough, key takeaways from the Foucauldian tradition are its recognition that discourse is constitutive, that interdiscursivity and intertextuality are central to discursive practice, that power has a discursive dimension, that discourse is inherently political, and that discourse plays a role in social change (ibid: 55-56). This reflects a room for theoretical engagement more recently encouraged by for instance Pratt (2013) with respect to critical realism and elements of poststructuralism.

4.3 Discourse and space

Having outlined my general position on discourse and discourse analysis within the critical realist tradition above, this section will further unpack some of its geographical dimensions in order to demonstrate its relevance for exploring examples of region work. As already argued in the previous chapter in relation to the production of regions, and in line with critical realist arguments regarding the structuring and structured nature of texts, discourse is understood as both constituted in and constitutive of space. The challenge, and aim of this section, is to explore the form of this dialectical relationship in an analytical way, reflecting recurring debates within socio-spatial theory more generally. As a starting point for this discussion, I draw on Lefebvre's (1991: 132) observation that

> Every language is *located in* space. Every discourse says something *about a* space (places or sets of places); and every discourse is *emitted from* a space (emphasis added).

This observation highlights both that discourse is inherently spatial – inseparable from the space in which it is produced – but also that discourse plays a central role in geographical processes, although it is worth noting that Lefebvre (1991: 131 ff) had deep reservations about strong constructionist accounts of the role of discourse in the production of space, presenting the lines above as a corrective to such accounts through emphasis on space as lived and on material production.

I expand on these points by unpacking the two dimensions of this dialectical, mutually constitutive relation between discourse and space in further detail; what I will refer to as the *spatialisation* of discourse and *spatialising effects* of discourse in reflection of Paasi (1996) and Shields' (1991) notions of spatial socialisation and social spatialisation. The spatialisation of discourse hence refers to how discourse should be understood as socio-spatially situated and specific – 'located in' and 'emitted from' space. The spatialising effects of discourse, meanwhile, refer to more concrete (but as I will also show, indirect) discourses on (or 'about a') space. This elaboration informs the discussion of region work and its relation to the institutionalisation of regions in the previous chapter by clarifying the analytical distinction between the two interrelated processes which tie discursive practice and spatial processes together.

The spatialisation of discourse

It is commonly acknowledged that discourse is inherently spatial; it is situated in time and space, bounded and scaled in a range of ways. As discussed below, even discourses that do not initially seem to be about space, place, scale, or some other geographical notion, concrete or not, are deeply spatial – not only physically *located*, but socio-spatially *produced*. Lefebvre (1991: 132) provides a reminder of this in the claim that human actors are always situated "in space; they cannot absent themselves from it". Discourse, being inseparable from human discursive practice, is likewise structured by the socio-spatial. For instance, as Paasi (2003: 478) argues regarding the production of regional space, the process of regional institutionalisation can be understood as on the one hand *giving rise to* specific discourses, practices, and rituals, while on the other hand being *conditioned by* them.

At least two strands of literature are central to this discussion. The first is related to the situated nature of discourse and of knowledge more broadly. Keskitalo (2015), for example, reflects on the geographical positionality of speakers and the direct ways in which space and scale influence discursive representations. She argues for the importance of investigating the geographical origin of a discourse and the relations of power between those representing and those represented, as a way of acknowledging the potential harm involved in representations of space originating from places of relative power. This is an example of how discourse may be spatialised in a concrete sense, reflecting broader discussions about positionality and situatedness (e.g., Dowler and Sharp, 2001; Haraway, 1988; Ó Tuathail, 1996).

The second strand of literature, while related to the former, considers how discourses are spatialised more abstractly. This is set within the context of broader debates regarding the dialectical relationship between the social and the spatial (e.g., Massey, 1984; Pred, 1984; Soja, 1980). Language, as one analysable element of the socio-spatial, hence provides a way of exploring these relations between space, social structure, and discourse. For instance, as Halfacree (1993: 27) notes, while "space is produced, reproduced and transformed by society […] this does not make it an 'environment' of social residues" – space is not merely a lifeless reflection of social structures or spatialising discourses. Crucially, it "represents the meshing together of structures but it also *delineates the structures themselves*" (ibid, emphasis in original). In short, spaces open up for the viability of certain discourses while precluding others – be it in terms of their practical adequacy (Sayer, 2000) or resonance (Neumann, 1999).

Both dimensions of the socio-spatial nature of discourse (that is, both its geographical origin and its socio-spatial structuration) are important for the conceptualisation of the contexts of region work in the previous chapter. Repeating Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer's (2002: 5) claim that "not just anything can be constructed" as a result of social and material constraints, there is a difference between what is successfully *constructed* and how it is *construed* in discourse. Additionally, the acknowledgement that all discourses are socio-spatially situated provides further reason to critically examine the contexts of region work. Emphasis on the mutually constitutive relationship between the spatial and the social, however, is a reminder that beyond space acting as 'context' from which discourses are produced, discourses also *enact* spaces, along with identities, practices, relationships and more.

Spatialising effects of discourse

As I began to outline earlier in this chapter, discourses are structuring – they have constitutive effects (Waitt, 2005) and enact certain identities, practices, relationships (Gee, 2014), and as geographers would add, spaces, both socially and materially. This can be illustrated very concretely by the way in which spatial policy discourses may foster certain practices over others, consequently shaping the spaces they concern (Richardson and Jensen, 2003). In other words, discourses are materialised when enacted in "ways of organizing space" (Fairclough, 2013: 182). Shields' (1991: 31) notion of social spatialisation, referring to "the ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imagery […] as well as interventions in the landscape", encompasses much of the same idea. As Halfacree (1993: 34) notes, the constitutive effects of discourse are present not only in imaginative but also physical dimensions of space. To Zieleniec (2007: 74-75), Lefebvre's (1991) notions of representations of space and spaces of representation may in this sense be regarded as discourses on space – discourses that one the one hand order knowledge and practice, but on the other hand also have the ability to challenge dominant representations. Altogether, examining politically produced representations of space (and crucially, "*how* and *why* they are dominant") is one way of mapping transformations in states' spatial strategies and the power relations that underpin them (Harrison, 2013: 58, emphasis in original).

The constitutive effects of discourse on space impact all levels of language in practice. As academics or in other professions, and as laypersons, we engage with a variety of discourses on space every day, consciously and not. For example, we consume and reproduce elite discourses on geopolitics, mediated though popular

media and circulated in broader societal discourses (Sharp, 1993), as well as popular representations of space in news media (Eriksson, 2008). The academic discourses we produce, reproduce, or reject in our attempts to academically define spaces or types of spaces likewise do so in interaction with popularised social representations (Halfacree, 1993), but also in the context of the conventions and constraints of academic norms and practices. As frames or lenses, discourses colour the way we approach an area of study, policy area, or other social sphere, including the questions we ask and the methods we employ to investigate the issues we produce though spatial problematisation (cf. Bacchi, 2012). By shaping how we make sense of spaces and spatial phenomena, the articulation and enactment of discourses on space hence account for its spatialising *effects*.

The spatialising effects of discourse are perhaps easiest to observe in the context of direct region work, or systematic and institutional activism, as outlined in the previous chapter. The analysis in Chapters 7 and 8, for example, examines how different actors construe the region using various scalar and territorialising strategies in the context of a government initiated regional reform and the local resistance it generated in Finnmark. However, indirect forms of region work have just as important spatialising effects. Because discourse is always structured – 'located in' and 'emitted from', as argued above – regional space is enacted or performed through everyday practices to the same extent as the active construction involved in explicit region-building attempts, albeit through different means. As I explore in Chapter 9, regional spaces are equally (re)produced indirectly through dominant discourses and counter-discourses alike, which may involve highly specific representations of space, be it through the identities, relationships, or practices it enacts.

Overall, then, the discursive dimension of region work must be understood in terms of actors' enactment of regional spaces, both in highly explicit ways and in more subtle, everyday acts, in both informal and highly formalised contexts. Following from the discussion above, the key question is how actors' region work produce spatialising effects, and what strategies they draw on – but also how these discourses are produced and emerge in a socio-spatial context. The academic literature addresses, for example, how different 'scale frames' may be leveraged to "construct meaningful (and actionable) linkages between the scale at which a social problem is experienced and the scale(s) at which it could be politically addressed or resolved" (Kurtz, 2003: 894). Actors may for instance utilise scalar strategies to enact the region with different political goals in mind (Gruby and Campbell, 2013). The notion of 'jumping scale' likewise suggests how actors can

mobilise scale as a political strategy (Smith, 1992; also Haarstad and Fløysand, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2004).

Mobilising scale frames is also about producing boundaries (Larsen, 2008). On this theme, scholarship has addressed how actors may mobilise boundaries and territory in "prosaic moments of *realpolitik*", while also engaging in networked ideas of regional space (Jones, 2022: 49, emphasis in original). Such approaches hence emphasise the discursive expression of states' spatial strategies in for instance maps, which give precedence to different "dimensions of sociospatial relations" at different points in time (Harrison, 2013: 58). The literature on practices of bordering (Paasi, 2022), strategies of territoriality (Sack, 1986), and geopolitical spatialisation (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992) are also relevant in this regard, and can inform analyses of different forms and contexts of region work. In the following chapter, I will explicate how I have analysed actors' diverse region work in terms of this breadth of discursive practice.

5 Research design and methods

In the previous chapters, I have presented the theoretical dimensions of a conceptual framework for analysing the practices and discourses involved in different actors' performance of region work. As such, I have made the case for approaching region work not only in terms of the direct or indirect forms it may take, but importantly also in terms of the institutional and more broadly socio-spatial contexts it is performed within. As I have argued in these chapters, while discourses enact spaces, they are also conditioned by different spatialities itself, which may enable certain discursive representations and practices while limiting others. This chapter contributes further to the analytical framework by outlining how I have approached my overall research strategy and carried out the analysis in practice. In what follows, I present and motivate my choice of research design and case selection, discuss my selection of empirical material and choice of analytical tools, and finally, describe the practical aspects of the analysis.

5.1 Overarching approach

The overarching aim of this thesis is, as stated in Chapter 1, to advance the current understanding of processes involved in the (re)production of regions through a closer theorisation of regional institutionalisation as a set of socio-spatial practices. More specifically, through this thesis I have set out to further develop the notion of region work as a way of examining how actors enact regions (consciously or not), the strategies they employ, and its implications for the transformation of regions. As I began to outline in the previous chapter, this thesis explores a range of discursive practices involved in these processes – not because I claim that social processes are reducible to discourse, but because the discursive accounts for a fundamental dimension of it; not an uncommon position among critical realists (e.g., Fairclough, 1992; Pratt, 1995). As such, while there are many ways of approaching regional institutionalisation (from large-scale geoeconomic processes to individual affective dimensions), the overt textuality of the practical

argumentation involved in explicitly political region work motivates my attention to the role of discourse in the (re)production of regional spaces.

To carry out the analysis I have adopted an intensive research design based on a case study approach (Sayer, 1984, 2000). Intensive research designs are orientated towards in-depth, case-specific studies of a particular process or phenomenon (Chapter 4); in terms of methods, this approach favours a qualitative, iterative, and contextual methodology (Sayer, 1984: 221). Within this framework, the case study approach allows me to address social action within its wider context – mirroring the 'open system' of social phenomena – and for the empirical data to take on a generative role in the process of conceptualisation (Orum et al., 1991).

Specifically, my approach is based on an in-depth single case study, considered beneficial for "exploring poorly understood and highly complex phenomena" (Boschma et al., 2014: 1313). The selection process, which I discuss in more depth later in this chapter, has been information oriented, meant to "maximize the utility of information" from an atypical single case (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230). Moreover, the approach is what may be called an 'embedded' single case study, involving several subunits of analysis (Yin, 2014): four empirical examples of region work within my case region. I consider this to be an embedded single case study because the four examples are interrelated and because the ultimate focus of the analysis is at the level of the case study (a case of a region's (re)production), not its subunits (different actors' involvement in this process).

By necessity, this research strategy involves an iterative approach; an ongoing move back and forth between research questions, conceptual development, and empirical analysis (Kerssens-van Drongelen, 2001; Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). This iterative strategy does not only apply to the process of collecting and interpreting empirical material, but furthermore, to examining the discourses I draw on as a researcher within the process of knowledge production. This is necessary given how the "tools we use to produce knowledge about the world are themselves produced by this world", and hence implicated in upholding specific socio-political orders (Alejandro, 2021: 154). Finally, the process-oriented nature of the research strategy (Vandenbussche et al., 2020) – reflecting that the empirical case is ongoing and has continually developed throughout the research period, as well as the analytical emphasis on the emergence and continual becoming of regions within the theoretical framework – gives further reason to adopt an iterative research design.

In line with this overarching approach, my understanding of the phenomenon of regional institutionalisation and the empirical case has co-developed over time

(hence, for instance, the discussion of counter-institutionalisation in Chapter 3). My initial case selection was informed by previous research on mergers from this perspective; the Norwegian regional reform and how it unfolded in Finnmark shares many similarities with other researchers' observations elsewhere (e.g., Frisvoll, 2016; Frisvoll and Almås, 2004; Zimmerbauer et al., 2017; Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013). The embeddedness of these processes in Finnmark within wider centre-periphery contestation, regionalist responses to the Covid-19 pandemic, and a nation-wide 'rural rebellion' seemed promising in terms of exploring a multitude of dynamics around regional institutionalisation processes. As expected from an iterative research process, the specific discourses and practices of region work I have encountered during periods of collecting and analysing the empirical material have continuously fed back into conceptual development, and, ultimately also re(de)fining the questions I asked of the material. The generative role of the empirical material hence becomes visible in the analysis where I utilise different actors to empirically explore and conceptually illustrate various dimensions of the conceptual framework.

Case selection

As indicated above, my initial research questions and subsequent case selection were informed by the literature on regional institutionalisation (including case studies of similarly contested amalgamations). These aspects of the study were additionally influenced by a 'pilot' study I conducted early on in the research process, which examined the spatialisation of Covid-19 discourse in a North Norwegian newspaper when physical access to the field during the pandemic was a challenge (Gulbrandsen, 2022). Finally, the iterative nature of the research process itself has also informed these decisions.

Several aspects of the chosen case region, Finnmark, indicated that it would provide a particularly information rich 'atypical' case of a region's contested transformation, understood to "activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied" (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230). On the most general level, the case region is embedded in a national context of long-standing cleavages between centre and periphery (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) which have recently re-emerged in the form of protest from *Distrikts-Norge* (Almås and Fuglestad, 2020). These are political cleavages which mirror trends elsewhere, but which also differ in some important respects, for instance in terms of economic conditions (Vik et al., 2022) and high levels of social and political trust (OECD, 2022; Stein et al., 2021a), and more fundamentally in its geographical and historical particularity.

The specific selection of Finnmark county as the geographical setting of the study, despite the existence of multiple overlapping, and at times competing regional spaces in and beyond northern Norway, was prompted by a number of coinciding events in the period prior to and at the beginning of the research project. Most concretely was the lead-up to the implementation of the Solberg Government's 2020 regional reform and what had been a highly contested process around the merger of Troms and Finnmark counties (Figure 5.1). In the same period, several other events which combined displays of northern regionalism and rural protest, as outlined in Chapter 1, further underscored the relevance of exploring the processes involved in the (re)production of regions, and the discourses and practices implicated in these processes. I therefore approached these events as a window into the broader process of regional institutionalisation; as a way of exploring how for instance regional identity is mobilised in various instances of regional contestation, but also possibly reshaped in this process. Additional contextual factors which guided my case selection, detailed in Chapter 6, were the relatively high degree of political regionalism at the scale of the political-administrative county in Finnmark (Baldersheim, 2003; Røvik, 2014; Stein et al., 2023), Finnmark's history and circumstances of incorporation into the Norwegian nation state (Niemi, 2007), as well as its embeddedness within a wider assemblage of political and cultural regional spaces such as Sápmi (the indigenous Sámi nation), North Norway, the Arctic, and the Barents region.

Altogether, I argue that Finnmark presents a suitable context for in-depth exploration of the contested politics of regionalisation, from the state-led implementation of a regional merger to local interest groups mobilising regionalist discourses in highly particular ways. These are events that are situated in and influence an always-ongoing process of regional institutionalisation, but cannot be reduced to it. To explore both of these dimensions, the analysis places the region work performed by four different actors at centre stage: the *Solberg Government*, responsible for the implementation of an extensive regional reform in 2020; *For Finnmark*, an interest group whose activity has been aimed at the reversal of the Troms-Finnmark merger within said reform; *Pasientfokus*, an Alta-based interest group turned into an electoral list advocating for the establishment of a local hospital; and *Kystopprøret*, a Vardø-based interest group seeking a restructuring of the fisheries sector. These actors hence constitute the subunits of my embedded single case study.
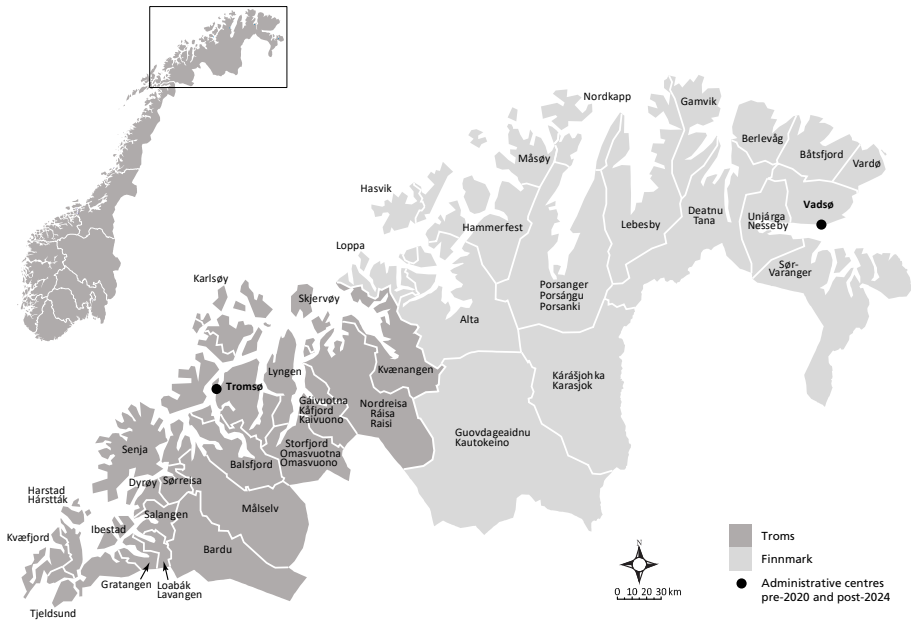
Figure 5.1 Troms and Finnmark County after 2020 merger, before 2024 dissolution
Base map: Kartverket (CC BY-SA 3.0 NO).

This selection of actors was made following an exploratory phase of the study, where I drew on a preliminary analysis of documents and interviews, as well as regionalist discourses identified in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (Gulbrandsen, 2022). I used this preliminary analysis to select relevant, diverse, and feasible empirical examples through which to explore the process of regional institutionalisation in Finnmark. As such, this is not intended to emulate an exhaustive selection equally covering all 'types' of region work presented in the typology in Chapter 3. Rather, in recognition that region work is performed across a spectrum of practices and discourses, by different actors and via different contexts and media, this selection attempts to explore a diversity of region work in its complex and overlapping nature.

Moreover, this selection of actors reflects a conscious choice to focus the analysis on examples of civic regionalism, as opposed to ethno-regionalist mobilisation, a relatively well studied dimension of regionalism also in the Norwegian context (e.g., Lien, 2017; Ryymin, 2001; Ryymin and Nyyssönen, 2012). This means that the analysis does not centre actors or movements that are, for instance, distinctly Sámi or Kven, but rather addresses how majority and minority identities,

histories, and interests are continuously represented, negotiated, silenced, and/or instrumentalised in civic regionalist discourse and the enactment of Finnmark as a region. The background for this is contextualised further in Chapter 6.

Centring four actors within the case study has several analytical functions. Firstly, it allows for exploring several forms of region work, from the more direct work of the Solberg Government's regional reform process and *For Finnmark*'s resistance to it, to the more indirect spatialising effects of discourses (re)produced by *Kystopprøret* and *Pasientfokus*. Secondly, it facilitates an examination of various socio-spatial contexts of region work and its limiting and enabling effects – for instance, to what extent the actors are situated in formal or informal political arenas, and with what type of discursive practice their work is associated with. Thirdly, emphasising four different actors enables consideration of the geographical scope of their region work; not only in terms of these groups' physical location and wider area of operation, but in terms of 'which' region is being produced by them, and who is defined as belonging to it. Fourthly, and in close relation to the socio-spatial context, it allows for exploring a selection of the varied practices involved in different actors' discursive region work. Because it is an impossible task to address the whole repertoire of an actor's practices within the scope of this thesis, I instead use a strategic selection of a limited number of key examples in an illustrative way. Finally and consequently, the design of the study has necessitated a flexible, context-dependent selection of empirical material guided by the actual discourses and practices being analysed. I elaborate further on my reasoning around the selection and collection of empirical material for the study in the next section.

5.2 Empirical material

The analysis in this thesis is based on a purposive selection of texts from a variety of sources, ranging from government documents and written materials associated with each organisational actor's online presence (primarily text published on their own websites) to key informant interviews, field observations, and archival material. In total, the written empirical material consists of 221 interest group blog entries and 49 other texts such as government white papers and draft bills/resolutions, but also internet sources. This is complemented by 10 key informant interviews as well as instances of field observation at various political events, and analysis of archival material. Sources of text are hence understood as

"any actual instance of language in use", both spoken and written (Fairclough, 2003: 3).

This selection of empirical material is motivated by both practical and methodological considerations. Because the purpose of the collected material is to explore different dimensions of regional institutionalisation processes, from the more formal to the more informal ends of the region work spectrum, it has been necessary to consult both documents like government white papers, and text published by public interest groups. I have done this in combination with explorative, open-ended interviews primarily with persons involved in relevant activist and political activity, which purpose has been to gain additional insights into the discourses identified in the written material. My fieldwork in Finnmark, primarily associated with the key informant interviews, also included ad hoc field observations. This included attendance at a municipally organised meeting in Alta regarding its upcoming consultative referendum about regional partition and potential amalgamation with 'new' Troms County, a 1 May gathering, and a Barents themed workshop in Kirkenes (North Sámi: *Girkonjárga*, Kven: *Kirkkoniemi*). This aspect of the fieldwork constituted a source of written field notes which I have used to supplement the analysis of documents and interviews, a context in which to collect further written material and seek out potential interview participants, and an opportunity for personally observing some of the distance and weather-related challenges highlighted by the interest groups. In the following sections I provide details about the rationale behind the selection of the larger portion of the empirical material (documents and interviews), and practical as well as ethical aspects of its collection and presentation. Some more detailed aspects of this selection are further elaborated in each respective analytical chapter.

Documentary sources

While in the social sciences more broadly some have noted a tendency to view documents as secondary to the spoken word (Prior, 2004), the case is often the opposite within approaches to discourse analysis, which tend to work with text that is 'naturally occurring'; that is, not seen as directly influenced (or rather, produced) by the research situation (Hammersley, 2014). Given my discourse analytical approach, which theoretical foundations I have already outlined in the previous chapter, I use documents (referring to all the written text sources) primarily in their function as primary sources, though they also perform an additional function of corroborating other sources (cf. Bowen, 2009: 29-30). Using documents as primary sources, from a discourse analytical perspective,

involves investigating the production and consumption of these documents – in other words, the discursive practice they are embedded in (Fairclough, 1992). This highlights that individual texts are not "unified and independent object[s]", but that documents are produced in complex ways (Prior, 2004: 350).

As outlined above, the different dimensions of the case study have required different types of empirical material to illustrate the variety of practices and discourses performed by different actors. For the first part of the analysis, which examines new regionalist government discourse (Chapter 7), the most relevant documents in question have been either government authored (white papers, strategies, draft resolutions/bills) or government commissioned (official reports). This is material that is available from the digital archives on the government's official website.

In terms of narrowing down this selection of sources, two factors have played a key role. On the one hand, the emphasis on discursive practice within my theoretical and methodological approach – that is, the production, consumption, and circulation of discourse – highlights how discourse 'travels': how it appears and is enacted across time and space, how it is expressed through different media and genres, and consequently how it is adopted, rejected, appropriated, and transformed by different actors. The intertextual nature of discourse therefore creates a methodological necessity for consulting a broad range of texts in the analysis (Waitt, 2005), the identification of which is an empirical endeavour of tracing intertextual chains or networks (Fairclough, 1992). Thus, based on the premise that discourse is relationally constituted, always drawing on already existing discourses when enacted in interaction with written or spoken text (Gee, 2014: 25), the selection and analysis process is necessarily iterative.

On the other hand, while adopting the view that discourse is relational and embedded in intertextual networks, it is necessary to impose manageable limitations on the scope of the analysis for practical reasons, similar to performing a type of artificial or strategic 'bracketing' (cf. Blomley, 2014). My strategy for making such bracketing choices have ultimately been based on several considerations. Firstly, I have limited the temporal scope of the core government document selection to the Solberg Government's two periods in office, from 2013-2021. This is a selection that includes the years in which documents with most immediate relevance for the policy process around the 2020 regional reform were published. By examining the national government as a central actor, the selection of material is further limited to documents authored or commissioned by this government (as opposed to analysing parliamentary debates, consultation

processes, or media reporting, which in the context of this thesis would be relevant but too extensive).

I nonetheless make this selection in recognition that the phenomenon in question takes place within, for instance, the context of long-standing national debate around the role of the counties in Norway, as well as wider reform trends both in Norway and beyond, and that this has significant implications in terms of which broader societal discourses the policy process interdiscursively relates to. This means, for example, that documents related to the northern dimensions of Norway's foreign policy constitute an important source of intertextuality in the reform documents and are as such included in the analysis where relevant. Consequently, in line with the preceding discussion of iterative research design, my final selection has not been limited to government documents regarding the regional scale only, but also government documents which in various ways place Finnmark and North Norway more broadly within the international context of the 'High North', the Barents region, and the Arctic. Finally, I have limited the document selection based on the idea of saturation in qualitative research methodology; the point at which collecting more material "provides little in terms of further themes, insights, perspectives or information" (Suri, 2011: 72).

My selection of primary sources for the interest group dimension of the analysis (Chapters 8 and 9) has followed a similar strategy to the one described above; however, these sources raise additional research ethics and data protection considerations not applicable to the government documents. As with the government documents, access to written texts such as blog entries has not been a practical issue due to the chosen interest groups' extensive online presence. In fact, as I show in the later analysis, communication via Facebook groups and pages, self-hosted websites, and opinion pieces in newspapers were among key strategies adopted by the groups, and hence constitute the bulk of the available empirical material.

Of this material, I have chosen to use blog entries as my main sources, while other sources have been used more sporadically to complement the analysis where appropriate. One motivation for this is that I have considered blog entries posted on self-hosted websites as generally easier to identify as representing the interest groups in question, in comparison to posts in for instance Facebook groups where both hosts and group members can contribute. For similar reasons, I have considered blog entries to pose fewer potential pitfalls in terms of handling personal data. Because these texts and the personal data they may contain can be considered manifestly public, that is, made intentionally public and accessible to

a broad audience as contributions to public, political debate – and moreover, because their authors are primarily public or semi-public persons representing an organisational actor – I consider the ethical risks of using this material to be relatively low. In many cases, the blog entries either do not have an identifiable author or are written by the groups' leadership. To further reduce potential risks, however, I refer only to the name of the interest groups responsible for publishing these texts, along with their date of publication and translated title, in the analysis.

In terms of the main time frame, while the three interest groups in focus emerged in response to different political issues, their activity as established groups began around the same time, at the beginning of the Solberg Government's second period. *Kystopprøret*, for example, was founded based on local public engagement in 2017, while *Pasientfokus*, which started as a post card campaign in 2017, transformed into a single-issue electoral list in 2021, when it won a seat in parliament in the national election. Finally, *For Finnmark* was founded in early 2018 in response to the government-initiated regional reform. Despite emerging from the same, recent historical conjuncture, however, their longer histories and connection to previous regional movements through personal networks, location, and strategies differ, and hence require consideration of the wider discourses and practices they are embedded within. As such, secondary and primary historical sources, including archival material accessed at the Borderland Museum in Kirkenes, with emphasis on historical movements relevant to current-day interest groups in the region, have played an important albeit smaller additional part of the analysis.

Finally, visual representations such as maps have only constituted a minor aspect of the whole range of written empirical sources. This is not the result of a conscious omission but rather that they are, contrary to what one could expect based on the literature on spatial images (Chapter 4), largely absent. This is especially conspicuous in the government authored documents, an absence which may itself be analytically noteworthy (Dühr, 2007; Zonneveld, 2021).

Key informant interviews

In addition to documentary sources, open-ended, in-depth interviews with local key informants also constitute a primary source of text in my overall research design. The key informants I have approached are persons I identified as either being involved in a relevant political or activist organisation in Finnmark, or as

having extensive personal or professional knowledge about the politics and processes of the region's ongoing transformation.

The rationale behind using this form of interviews as empirical material has been to gain additional insights into how discourses are produced, consumed, and circulated locally. Unlike the case of government discourse, where (aspects of) the policymaking process is extensively documented, counter-discourses (Chapter 3) can be less obviously so. While, as I discuss above, there is a vast amount of written text that documents the selected interest groups' counter-discourses, they arguably constitute a less coherent set of texts. For instance, the media through which they are published vary considerably (from social media to established news media), or they might not be published at all, only accessible within local networks. The benefit of combining documentary sources with interviews is therefore that, beyond using interviews as examples of counter-discourse, they have also fulfilled a complementary purpose of accessing perspectives that may not have a written equivalent and providing information about where to access further written material. As such, I have used interviews as a way of supplementing the counter-discourse dimension of the more extensive document analysis, conscious of critiques which argue that discourse analyses often focus too single-mindedly on discourses of dominance at the expense of discourses of resistance (e.g., Hughes, 2018; Neumann, 1999).

In practical terms, I have carried out a total of ten interviews, averaging at 1 hour 15 minutes (ranging from 52 minutes to 1 hour 52 minutes), during two rounds of fieldwork in Finnmark: first in June 2021, and later in April and May 2022. The first trip included visits to Sør-Varanger, Vadsø, and Vardø municipalities in East Finnmark (North Sámi: *Mátta-Várjjat*, *Čáhcesuolu*, and *Várggát*, Kven: *Etelä-Varenki*, *Vesisaari*, and *Vuorea*). During the second trip I revisited the locations from the first trip, but also visited Alta, Kautokeino, and Karasjok municipalities in West Finnmark (North Sámi: *Áltá*, *Guovdageaidnu*, and *Kárášjohka*, Kven: *Alattio*, *Koutokeino*, and *Kaarasjoki*). Most of the interviews took place in person, while for some I relied on phone or video calls. More practical information concerning the interviews are provided in a table in the list of primary sources.

The interview themes and questions were tailored to each individual interviewee and the organisational 'actor' they represented (when relevant, since not all interviewees had a direct relation to the analysed interest groups), but generally stayed aligned to more overarching themes such as regional identity, centre-periphery politics, and activist strategies. In specific, the interviews variously addressed the Troms-Finnmark merger, fisheries policy, and hospital

infrastructure, along with more general discussions touching on regional identity and conflict over natural resources. These themes overlap to some degree, and it has not been uncommon for an interviewee to address more than one theme. Moreover, not all the interviews are directly or extensively quoted in the final analysis, but they have all nonetheless performed an important role within the iterative research process, and have contributed to situating the analysed discourses in their wider social context (cf. Pratt, 1995). Due to research ethics and privacy considerations, all interview material appears in the thesis in a pseudonymised (numbered) way, and I have deliberately chosen not to provide detailed contextual information about each interview because of the identification risk posed by the small communities from which I recruited my interviewees.

Conducting interviews for the specific purpose of discourse analysis presents certain methodological and ethical challenges which differ from those that apply to official documents. As Hammersley (2014) notes, expectation gaps may arise between interviewer and interviewed regarding the objective of the interview: whether it is used for observing discursive practices, or for gathering information, viewpoints, and subjective experiences. From this perspective, attempts to close this expectation gap by providing more detailed information about the actual rationale for the interview could both increase its reactivity and consequently make the collected material less useful, and clash with participants' expectations due to differences between 'naturalistic' and 'constructionist' attitudes. I consider the latter to be a crucial point; as Hammersley (2014: 534) puts it, interviewees may "bridle at the suggestion that the research will focus upon how [the topic of the interview] is constituted in and through their own talk", especially if the topic is a politically or socially contentious one. This gap can potentially be further exacerbated through my analytical focus on discourse in a more collective sense, rather than individual utterances (e.g., Cruickshank, 2012; Rahm et al., 2014).

My experience of this 'gap' in the actual interview situations, however, has varied. Several of my interviewees turned out to have a background in the social sciences similar to my own, sometimes leading to research practice and academic literature itself becoming a topic of discussion in the interviews – the role of southern researchers in the north, and the influence of the North Norwegian sociologist Ottar Brox (Chapter 6) being examples of this. In these situations, it became natural to explain the purpose of the research in more technical terms than when interviewing people with a different background.

On the issue of reactivity, however, different perspectives exist. As Cameron (2001: 32) argues, it is not necessarily the case that discourse which is naturally

occurring rather than elicited in an interview situation should be considered the benchmark of discourse analysis, because "all kinds of talk are shaped by the context in which they occur". In this vein, Cruickshank (2012: 45) contends that "what is articulated in an interview must be seen as an interview-discourse, on its own producing a version of reality". As such, "even if discourse theory shares the problem of the constructedness of the interview situation with other research traditions, it departs from the others since the difference is not between reality and its representation, but between two different discursive settings" (ibid: 43). Discourse is *always* performed within and structured by a concrete socio-spatial context – a context that cannot be eliminated from the interview situation.

Nonetheless, reflection about the interview context and how it may influence the discourse being produced in that setting becomes crucial (Cameron, 2001). In my case, a few factors have shaped my decision to be relatively transparent about the rationale of the interviews. One is that the orientation of my research is not concerned with language as an object in itself – its analysis is rather a means to examine socio-spatial processes. Another is that the interview material to some extent is used to complement the analysis of other empirical material, for instance to gain insight about a group's strategy. Finally, as alluded to above, my experience when carrying out interviews for this study is that communicating my intention and approach has in certain cases been beneficial for establishing rapport with interviewees, who may share similar reference points. In relation, my emphasis on counter-discourse and resistance within a critical discourse analysis approach (e.g., Hughes, 2018; Schröter, 2015; Stibbe, 2017), as well as the moderately constructionist, critical realist standpoint I adopt, avoids some of the risks of academic 'relativism' – but raises other questions about positionality and critique (Gorup, 2019; also Sayer, 2000), addressed in the next section.

5.3 Analytical strategy

As already indicated, I have analysed the empirical material using an approach that is aligned with the theoretical and methodological foundations of critical discourse analysis, outlined in the previous chapter. To briefly reiterate, this framework conceives of discourse as dialectically related to social structure – socially constituted and constitutive. In this way, discourse is understood as both a "mode of action" and a "mode of representation" (Fairclough, 1992: 63), justifying not only an analytical focus on what is said but also how it is stated, and

to what effects (Fairclough et al., 2002). In line with this, approaches to critical discourse analysis tend to emphasise the relation between the semiotic and the extra-semiotic, which requires the analysis to be performed in an interdisciplinary way that emphasises relations between texts, discursive practice, and wider socio-spatial structure (Fairclough, 2013: 179).

Critique in discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis is additionally committed to normative and explanatory critique, both in terms of identifying and critiquing "unequal relations of power […] which may be manifest in discourse", and in providing explanations of "the establishment, maintenance or change of social order as partly effects of discourse" (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012: 79). The evaluative function of critical discourse analysis hence raises questions both about research integrity and about the basis for normative judgement (Gorup, 2019). Regarding the first, researchers adhering to critical discourse analysis methodology would take issue with the implied premise that research can ever be truly 'neutral' (ibid: 16; also Graham, 2018). To acknowledge this is not an uncommon stance outside of critical discourse analysis either, reflected in the statement that "theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose" – it is never perspective free (Cox, 1981: 128, emphasis in original). Explicating one's stance, however, and providing transparency about methodological choices and processes, becomes crucial, as well as acknowledging the limitations of these. Regarding the second, a range of strategies of critique have been adopted in works of critical discourse analysis. Herzog (2018), in contrast to the external forms of critique adopted by for instance Fairclough and van Dijk, suggests a strategy based on immanent critique. This is an approach based on the understanding of 'social suffering', broadly defined, as emerging "from the difference between normative claims and the reality of these claims being fully or partially disregarded" (ibid: 116). The target of critique hence becomes the social orders that sustain such contradictions.

In the pilot study undertaken in the beginning of this research project, I analysed what Herzog (2018: 116) would call the claims to "misrecognition" or experiences of contradiction that underpinned the 'northern peripherality' discourse that emerged in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in North Norway (Gulbrandsen, 2022). I found that the conflict over pandemic restrictions that developed during this period centred around regional grievances concerning long-term geographical, infrastructural, and political peripheralisation, and its resulting societal vulnerabilities. As I unpack further in the analysis in Chapters 8 and 9 of

this thesis, similar claims have underpinned the counter-discourses that emerged over the contested merger between Troms and Finnmark counties in 2020. Adopting the form of critique outlined above, this becomes the claim that informs the direction of my analysis – though this does not imply that I necessarily subscribe to all aspects of the counter-discourses I analyse. This necessitates some further reflections on my positionality and its implications for the research process.

In Chapter 3, I suggested that I inevitably engage in my own region work, both in the interview situation, in analysing texts, and in the process of knowledge production. Both academic and everyday concepts, experiences, and representations which shape my positionality as a researcher as well as my interview participants are historically and geographically produced and affect how we perform different discourses and enact specific relationships, practices, identities, and spaces in partially unconscious ways, be it to do with peripherality, regional identity, or economic growth. While it is difficult to transparently and exhaustively 'map out' these subject positions and their implications, since identity is relationally constituted by the research situation itself (Rose, 1997), I nonetheless wish to draw attention to some of the more tangible features of these relations in the interview encounters, which are partly standardised interactions but nonetheless far from predetermined and straightforward (Scott et al., 2012).

Being a South Norwegian researcher from Oslo with some previous research experience and networks in Finnmark has enabled my positionality as an 'outsider' and 'insider' in different respects. The interpersonal relationships this has enabled in interview encounters have naturally differed from interview to interview, potentially acting as both a barrier and a resource depending on the situation (cf. Medby, 2023). For instance, having already delved into the North Norwegian media landscape in the context of my pilot study at the time of the fieldwork, and being acquainted with how cleavages between the urban and the rural, centre and periphery, and north and south are drawn on in political and everyday discourse in Norway more generally, I was well aware of the number of ways in which I could be perceived as a typical *søring* – a southerner – in the eyes of my respondents. Moreover, unlike many of my interview participants, I am not an expert in either fisheries policy or local political history. In some interactions, being an outsider in this way has contributed to some of my interpretations being challenged and my preconditions for understanding being explicitly addressed by interviewees, be it in the case of regional history, fragile marine ecosystems, or the intricacies of local politics. In other cases, sharing similarities in for instance

educational background or gender with interviewees may have allowed other assumptions to go unspoken, while facilitating deeper, even quite personal, engagement in other areas. Overall, I found that my 'southernness' often prompted productive conversations about Finnmark's particularity, regional history, southern domination, and Norwegianisation (Chapter 6) – but importantly often *also* a wish among interviewees to elevate the discussion above a north-south dichotomy, instead addressing other potential factors behind recent political protest.

Certainly, my positionality does not just affect the relations I was able (or not able) to establish with interview participants; it is deeply involved in the entire research process, from the research questions I considered valuable to raise, the methods I have chosen to address them, and my interpretation of the empirical material. This connects back to the role of normative and explanatory critique in critical discourse analysis, and the grounds from which I have based my critical approach. One ubiquitous feature to consider is therefore the epistemological privilege that is attributed to academic interpretation and production of knowledge (Allen, 2005). As Allen suggests, the privileging of academic interpretation is not just a result of interpersonal relations but "the wider social relations of research production" that shape the research process (ibid: 994). For similar reasons, some scholars have stressed the importance of examining academic practice beyond engaging in reflexive introspection (Kobayashi, 2003). To help me do so, I draw on Alejandro's (2021) strategy of reflexive discourse analysis as a way of examining and shaping my own research practice from a discourse analytical lens. As Alejandro emphasises, researchers are not just situated observers but also active social agents whose practices have implications for the social world. Hence, in assessing my own discourse against a 'compass discourse' at different stages of the research and writing process (ibid), I have for example sought to neither contribute to a further discursive 'peripheralisation' of my selected case region, nor to fall into the trap of reproducing the economic growth focussed optimism often found in government documents, which tend to be based on very specific and locally contested notions of development and natural resource utilisation.

Practical considerations

Following from these more overarching concerns of critical discourse analysis, this section addresses two key analytical issues in more detail. These relate to how

socio-spatial representations are constructed as part of a discourse, and how they are related to rationalities and practices that become intertwined in this process.

The first analytical issue revolves around the process of problematisation; that is, a view of politics as practical argumentation (e.g., Bacchi, 2012; Fairclough, 2013; Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012; Hajer, 1995). This approach places emphasis on the ways in which phenomena are construed as issues in need of specific kinds of intervention and offers a toolbox for addressing this process of construction in policy documents, political debates, or similar texts. My analytical focus, however, is not on how issues become problematised or politicised as such. My theoretical and methodological concern is, as discussed in the previous chapter, mainly how issues become objects of political contestation within a regionalisation process, that is, not just how they become problematised as political issues but how they become scaled and territorialised in different ways. As indicated in the previous chapter, my analytical emphasis is placed on how issues become *spatialised* through discourse.

The second analytical issue regards the intertextual and interdiscursive dimensions of discourse (e.g., Bhatia, 2010; Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2014; Koskela, 2013), based on an understanding of discourse as relationally produced. On the most superficial level, texts may directly refer to, quote, or allude to other texts, and should therefore be thought of as positioned within an intertextual chain, while on a deeper level, texts may draw on a variety of discourse types, with implication for the kind of genres, discourses, rationalities and so on a given text contains. Of the two, interdiscursivity is the more complex and interpretive element to analyse, but potentially also the most significant, because it indicates how different rationalities, logics, interests, and practices are transposed into new contexts. This way, a text's manifest and constitutive (interdiscursive) intertextuality is related to the constitutive nature of discourse, though as Fairclough (1992: 103) notes, "this productivity is not in practice available to people as a limitless space for textual innovation and play: it is socially limited and constrained, and conditional upon relations of power".

I now turn to how I have sought to address these analytical issues in practice, keeping in mind that there are challenges associated with reconstructing an iterative research process "characterized by a long-term engagement with […] texts: reading, rereading, interpreting and reinterpreting" (Pratt, 1995: 71), an issue commonly found in accounts of the process of doing discourse analysis (Lees, 2004). The first step of my analysis process has concerned the preparation of the empirical material, which in the case of the recorded interviews involved a

transcription process. I transcribed the interview recordings in their original language (Norwegian) to preserve the original wording of interview statements during the analysis process, including interviewees' use of dialect. I did so because of the inevitable loss of complexity from the transcripts once they are translated and the language is standardised (Medby, 2023). I further approached the transcription process through a mixture of verbatim transcription and paraphrasing. My decision to paraphrase sections of the interview recordings was influenced by my gradually increasing familiarity with the themes arising from prior interviews as well as the written empirical material throughout the research process. This enabled me to make informed decisions about when to utilise verbatim transcription and when to paraphrase. In terms of the other empirical material, the first step involved either preparing it for analysis within the qualitative analysis software NVivo (in the case of blog entries, a practical choice given their high number), or simply collecting the relevant documents for a more manual analysis process in the case of the fewer, but longer, documents such as government white papers and draft bills/resolutions.

The second step has involved the process of reading and familiarising myself with the material, combined with an initial thematic organisation of the material in its original language. In the case of the interview transcripts, this took the form of creating several thematic summaries which became more condensed with each version. For the government documents, it involved extensive annotation and note taking, and eventually, placing text excerpts in a table structured by Fairclough's (2013) approach to practical argumentation. Doing so contributed to identifying and reconstructing key arguments in the texts, highlighting the relations between these texts' circumstantial premise and stated goals, values, means, and claims (also Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012). For the blog entries, I performed a similar process of thematically ordering the texts as with the interviews, except with the help of thematic nodes in NVivo. I approached this as primarily a practical support in managing the empirical material, rather than as an analytical tool in itself, since my methodological approach is not geared towards the types of analysis enabled by the software (cf. MacMillan, 2005).

The third step has been to approach the thematically ordered material by applying overarching questions related to the two analytical issues outlined above. These are questions that reflect important features of my theoretical and methodological framework, such as: 1) which direct or indirect 'discourses on space' are identifiable in the texts?, 2) how do they present specific 'problems' as being of a socio-spatial nature and which solutions do they propose or enable, if any?, 3) in

what ways are these discourses socio-spatially structured?, 4) how do they appear to be spatialised more concretely?, 5) what evidence is there of manifest and constitutive intertextuality in the texts?, 6) what are its effects on discursive representations?, and 7) in what ways do examples of intertextuality relate to the constitutive function of discourse, in conventional or transformative ways? In subsequently writing up the analysis, I have selected quotes that illustrate identified key discourses. Throughout the empirical chapters, I have sought to contextualise these quotes, for instance by indicating whether they represent a common or more polemical viewpoint, and the situation they are expressed in.

The process of translating text segments from Norwegian to English can be considered a separate, final step. I have sought to strike a balance between literal translation and conveying meaning where a literal translation might be unclear. In some cases, I have included original Norwegian words or phrases in brackets to signal difficulties in translation. For the sake of simplicity, all quotes from primary sources in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 are translated by me; likewise, emphasis in these quotes has been added to highlight specific words and phrases, unless otherwise stated.

As a concluding note on terminology, I would like to clarify that throughout the next chapters I use the term 'discourse' primarily to refer to what Fairclough (1992: 5) calls discourse in a social-theoretical sense, such as when I refer to 'reform discourse' or 'fisheries discourse'. In contrast, I use the term 'narrative' in Chapters 8 and 9 to refer to "a specific kind of text/talk structure with a 'storyline'" (Fløttum and Gjerstad, 2017: 2). Likewise, I approach 'practical argumentation' in Chapter 7 in the same way (e.g., Fairclough, 2013); that is, as a specific form that discourses may take. This is a consequence of dividing the empirical chapters up as I have, each addressing a working question presented in the introduction: *how are state-led regionalisation processes such as territorial reforms enacted discursively in Norway?* (Chapter 7), *how is the state's regionalisation discourse contested locally in Norway?* (Chapter 8), and *how do regionalisation discourses performed by state and local actors interact with region work beyond the administrative and political shape of regions in Norway?* (Chapter 9). Before turning to the empirical chapters, however, Chapter 6 first provides a more in-depth geo-historical introduction to Finnmark than what the discussion on case selection above could reasonably include.

6 Finnmark in a geo-historical perspective

Following the previous chapters, in which I outlined the conceptual framework and methodological approach of this study, the thesis now turns to the empirical context of the case study. As such, this chapter acts as a contextual bridge which seeks to introduce the case region historically and geographically, thus laying the foundations for the later analysis of present-day regional institutionalisation processes in Finnmark. The chapter provides a non-exhaustive overview of key events and processes with implications for the geo-historical production of Finnmark, drawing on my analysis of both documents and key informant interviews to identify which elements have emerged as most crucial for the contextualisation of the following analysis. In approaching regions as relational and temporary constructs, this chapter moves beyond Finnmark in a bounded sense to illuminate how the region has been and continues to be constituted in overlapping region work on both the subnational and supranational scale.

6.1 The historical institutionalisation of Finnmark

Given the theoretical approach of this thesis, which emphasises the importance of not conflating the administrative or political function of a region with its cultural and identity-based dimensions, it is necessary to briefly trace out some aspects of Finnmark's history as a region recognised in the wider social consciousness. In this regard, we can observe how symbolic, territorial, and institutional dimensions of the region have developed 'asynchronously' over time (cf. Frisvoll, 2016). The place name Finnmark, or *Finnmǫrk* in Old Norse, initially referred to a much larger region inhabited by the indigenous Sámi, Sápmi, stretching across the northern and central parts of what is today the states of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and (Northwestern) Russia. In literal terms, the name also referred to Sámi inhabited land or forest in general (Berg-Nordlie, 2021). The area was as such not

considered to be a part of Norway, but rather seen as a vast land lying to the north of it, as famously described in for instance Egil Skallagrimsson's saga from the 1200s:

> Finnmarka is immeasurably wide. To the west lies the sea, and from there large fjords cut in, as well as to the north and all the way to the east. To the south lies Norway. Finnmarka encompasses almost the entire interior as far south as Hålogaland along the coast. There are large mountain villages up there, partly in valleys and partly around lakes (quoted in Kjelen, 2022: 19-20).

These relations remained relatively stable up until the early Middle Ages, after which the 'territorial balance' and relations between the Sámi and the Norse populations changed. The colonisation of Sámi land through settlement, the integration of these areas into wider geopolitical and geoeconomic relations, and the increasing role of Christianity were key contributors to this shift (Hansen and Olsen, 2006). Thus, as Norse settlements expanded northwards, Finnmǫrk, later *Finmarken*, came to refer to a smaller area, and eventually, it became perceived as an area to which the Danish-Norwegian authorities had claim (Berg-Nordlie, 2021). Taxation became a strategy for states to establish spheres of influence in the area; exclusive as well as common zones were stipulated as part of peace agreements between the competing states in the early 1300s, a status that more or less remained for the following 300-400 years (Hansen and Olsen, 2006).

The colonisation, integration, and missionary activities that took place during the Middle Ages began to take on a more direct, systematic, and institutional form in the mid-16th century, connected to the strategic interests of the Nordic states (Hansen and Olsen, 2006). For a long time, state borders in the northernmost part of the country had remained undefined and deeply contested, and from the late 16th century, the Danish-Norwegian authorities faced several foreign policy challenges in the area: Russian and Swedish attempts at territorial expansion, along with the presence of European trading vessels which evaded taxes and sailing permits in what the authorities considered to be Norwegian waters (Hagen, 2019). The state's assertion of sovereignty in the north consequently had deep implications for the indigenous Sámi, who lived across the contested borders, because the right to levy taxes from these groups was key to making territorial claims. As a result, the incorporation of Sámi land into the Danish-Norwegian state through colonisation became of key importance (Hagen, 2019). Maps of the region were used strategically to support territorial claims, both by the Danish-Norwegian and Swedish authorities (Mead, 2020). Due to overlapping territorial claims it was therefore not until later that all of Finnmark, as it is known today,

was fully incorporated into the Norwegian state, with the inclusion of Kautokeino and Karasjok in 1751 as part of a more extensive border agreement with Sweden, and the inclusion of Sør-Varanger in 1826 after a border agreement with Russia (Lien and Lundberg, 2022; Mead, 2020; Niemi, 2007).

Maps from this period (Figure 6.1), while used as a "symbolic cartographic expression of the unification of Norway into a single kingdom", also revealed the incompleteness of this process in continuing the tradition of drawing the northernmost part of the county, associated with Sámi and Kven populations, at half the scale as the rest of the country (Selstad, 2003a: 12). Meanwhile, a map from 1905 illustrates the contested nature of state borders in the north in this period from the Norwegian state's perspective (Figure 6.2). Drawn some time after the final border adjustments in the area, it depicts exclusive territorial claims by both Sweden and Russia, as well as the areas which were previously considered to be shared between two or more states. As I return to in Section 6.3, however, the finalisation of state borders in the north did not equate an end to the Norwegian state's continual nation-building efforts aimed at neutralising internal and external 'threats' in the region.

The institutionalisation of Finnmark as a region can also be traced in terms of the development of regional administrative units within the state. The geographical area which until 2020 was referred to as *Finnmark fylke* first became its own administrative unit in 1576, under the name Vardøhus *len*. Vardø, located in the northeast of Finnmark, was of key importance to the Danish-Norwegian state's exercise of power in the north, both in terms of physical presence at Vardøhus fortress, customs collection, and intelligence gathering (Hagen, 2019). Later, Vardøhus len became Vardøhus *amt* in 1668, a reflection of the introduction of absolute monarchy in Denmark-Norway in 1660 and a subsequent regional transfer of power from *lensherrer*, positions held by members of aristocratic families, to civil servants subject to the crown, *amtmenn* (Pedersen, 2007). It was not until the incorporation of Senja and Tromsø *fogderi* (a tax-collecting subunit) into Vardøhus amt in 1787 that the new administrative unit, which mirrors the amalgamated Troms and Finnmark County between 2020 and 2023, received the name *Finnmarkens amt* (Figure 6.3). Finnmarkens amt was later dissolved again in 1866, but the unit that had previously been known as Vardøhus now remained known as Finnmark (Figure 6.4). Finnmarkens amt eventually became Finnmark *fylke* in 1919, marking a symbolic return to the term used in Norway during medieval times (Selstad, 2003), and remained as such up until – and following the dissolution of – the 2020 merger.
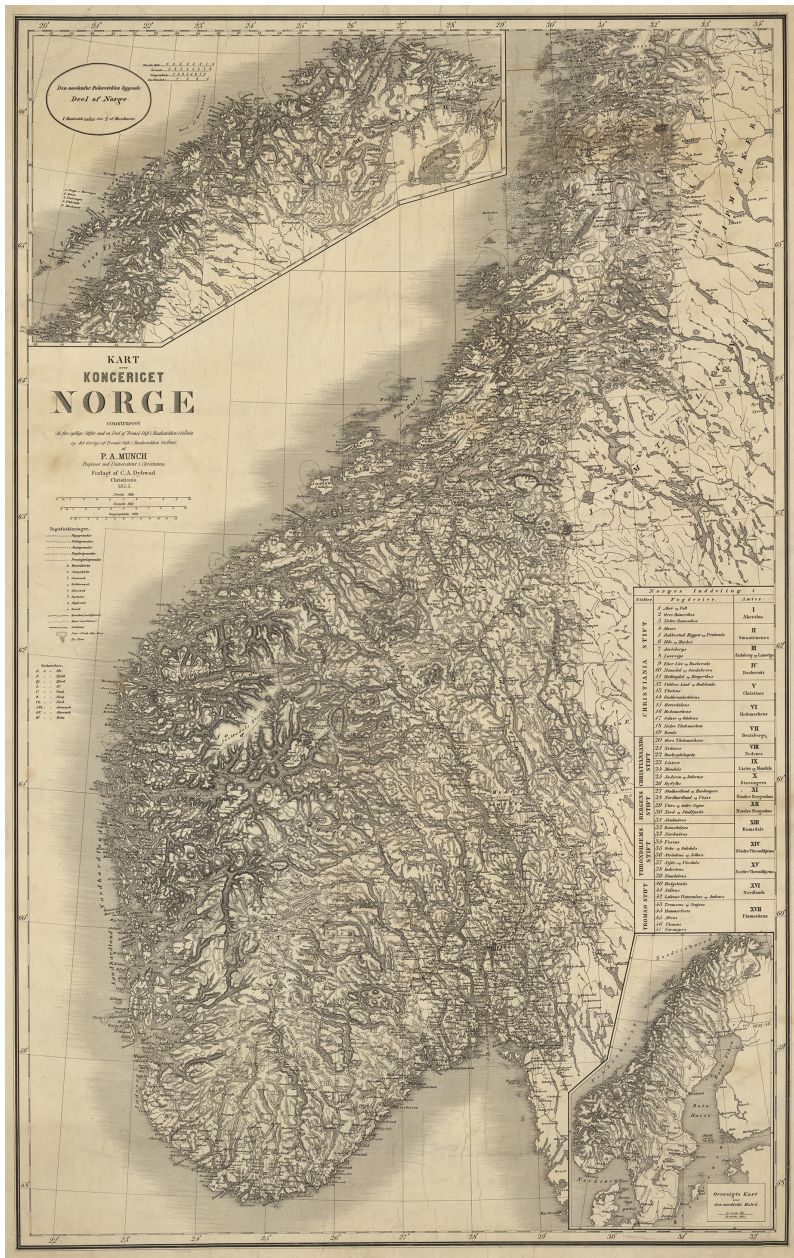
Figure 6.1 Map of Norway, 1855
Source: Kartverket (Norges Geografiske Oppmaaling/C. A. Dybwad, Christiania): Norge 171:
Kart over Kongeriget Norge, 1:1400000/1:2800000, P. A. Munch, 1855.

Figure 6.2 Map of Finnmark, 1905, "with adjacent parts of Sweden, Finland and Russia showing Swedish pretensions before the Treaty of 1751 – and the Norwegian-Russian joint land before 1826"
Source: Kartverket (Norges Geografiske Oppmaaling/H. Aschehoug og Co): Finmarkens amt nr 52: Kart over Finmark, 1:1000000, 1905.

Figure 6.3 Finmarkens amt, 1831 (note that the 1826 border change is not shown)
Source: Kartverket (Norges Geografiske Oppmaaling): Norge 153: Kart over Finmarkens
Amt, 1:750000, O. H. Cold, 1831.

Figure 6.4 Finmarkens amt, 1906
Source: Kartverket (Norges Geografiske Oppmaaling): Kart over Finmarkens Amt, 1:500000,
A. Helland, C. P. Bruun, 1906.

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6.2 Finnmark in a North Norwegian context

Finnmark's institutionalisation as a region must also be understood in the context of – an in relation to – the emergence and institutionalisation of a larger North Norway region, encompassing today's Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark counties, during the late 19th century. Up until this point in time, there was no overarching (Norwegian) northern regional 'consciousness': the area had no common name, and "there was hardly any clear idea of the region as a distinct territorial unit" from a Norwegian perspective (Niemi, 2009: 39). Rather, the idea of a North Norway region was initially a result of the active region-building efforts of a northern diaspora based in the capital, which by the 1930s had been joined by public officials and merchants based in the region in their efforts to raise a North Norwegian consciousness and place regional concerns on the national political agenda (Niemi, 2007). Within North Norway, however, Finnmark maintained a distinct identity. According to Niemi (2007: 91), there existed a "somewhat tense relationship between Finnmark and the rest of North Norway […] even in the early phase of north Norwegian regionalism", exemplified by encounters in which people from Finnmark "were confirmed in their belief that they were perceived as existing on the margin of the region, in a periphery of the periphery, in a region within the region".

The aftermath of the Second World War had further implications for the development of a northern regional consciousness (Niemi, 2007). Finnmark and North Troms had been burnt to the ground by retreating German troops, and large parts of the population were forcibly evacuated southwards (Skancke, 2015). Reconstruction was the key focus of the war's immediate aftermath; the shift towards addressing what was seen as more structural problems of regional imbalance, and the related notion of a 'North Norway problem', came about in the early 1950s with the establishment and implementation of the North Norway Plan (Thomassen, 1997; also Zachariassen, 2008). Its purpose was modernisation through industrialisation, seen as important not only from a regional policy perspective but also in terms of defence and foreign policy considerations due to Finnmark's border to the Soviet Union (Teigen, 2019). The modernisation drive of the North Norway Plan must as such be understood in light of the perceived "need for stronger economic, political and cultural integration of the region in the nation state" (Thomassen, 1997: 115).

In the following era, a period lasting up until the mid-1990s, the North Norway *landsdel* identity was characterised by "mass regionalism": bottom-up emphasis on

regional uniqueness and counter-hegemonic critique of the wider modernisation project (Zachariassen, 2008: 131). Corresponding with a more overarching period of peripheral protest in Western Europe during the 1960s and 70s (Rokkan and Urwin, 1983: 118), it has been described as a period of cultural revitalisation with flourishing northern literature, contemporary folk music, and the political movement against Norway joining the European Community. Moreover, as Juvik (1983: 10) describes, North Norwegian youth rallied around calls for a 50 nautical mile fishery zone based on "a demand to maintain North Norwegian settlements, and to preserve the resources in the sea against what was perceived as overfishing by foreign actors". Popular songs like *50 mil for Norge* ('50 miles for Norway') and *Bygdevisa (Kor er hammaren, Edvard)* ('The village song') became significant in this period not only because they addressed political themes related to fisheries, regional policy, and rurality, but also in their public use of North Norwegian dialect (Jacobsen, 2014), at a time when the revitalisation of dialects was associated with counter-culture (e.g., Sollid, 2008).

On a similar theme, Zachariassen (2008) points to the influence of Ottar Brox and the 1966 publication of *Hva skjer i Nord-Norge?* ('What is happening in North Norway?') in the same, counter-hegemonic struggle. The book played a strong agenda-setting role and was intended as a political contribution to the debate around the Norwegian government's regional policy towards North Norway in the aftermath of the Second World War. In specific, the book problematised the North Norway Plan in terms of its goals, means, and effects. In Brox' (1966) analysis, the plan was based on a 'technocratic' rationale which measured value in terms of economic growth, productivity, and the region's contribution to the state's gross domestic product, not what people, who often combined small scale fishing with subsistence agriculture, valued. Brox argued that the plan, which incentivised full-time employment, made it more difficult to continue with combining occupations, and contributed to increased urbanisation and consequently the depopulation of the North Norwegian countryside. Instead, Brox called for a 'populistic' or bottom-up logic based on maximising the economic opportunities of family and local community units through cooperatives.

While Brox' alternative North Norway Plan had little direct political influence – as Zachariassen (2008: 132) notes, it never became official policy – the book has symbolically influenced the Norwegian debate ever since its publication, including the emergence of critical geography in Norway (Lehtinen and Simonsen, 2022). According to Knudsen (2018: 70), the book "signalled one of

the most specific turns that the Western cultural and political crisis of the late 1960s took in Norway, namely that the geographical contradictions challenged by two decades of post-World War II restructuring and centralization set the agenda for the political and academic debate" (also Holt-Jensen, 2019). In many ways, the book was a reflection of political movements of its time, for instance in the wider regional policy debate and the 1972 European Community referendum, which were both characterised by a centre-periphery dynamic (Teigen, 2012: 162). The book's symbolic success means that reference to the 'North Norway problem' (also Brox, 1984) still carries an implicit understanding of what the core of the matter is (cf. Zachariassen, 2008), also indicated by references to the book in contemporary discourse.

The period from the 1970s and onwards also saw increasing academic attention to Sámi and Kven minorities. This was characterised by a gradual shift from the aim of making these groups more 'visible', to exposing the impact of the Norwegian state's long-lasting assimilation policy towards these groups, and finally, to more agency focussed storytelling (Ryymin and Nyyssönen, 2012). Growing ethnic minority mobilisation is one of the factors Niemi (2007) and Zachariassen (2008) attribute to the eventual decline or fragmentation of North Norway as a common regional identifier since the 1990s, along with globalisation, anti-essentialism, changing government policies, a changing regional self-image, and regionalisation at the international scale. Others point to for instance the discovery of petroleum resources in the Barents Sea and the weak regional reform of 2010 (Chapter 7) as additional contributors to a weakened North Norwegian identity (e.g., Fitjar, 2013; Røvik, 2014).

6.3 Sápmi, Finnmark, and Norwegianisation

As hinted at in Section 6.1, the settlement of state borders in the 18th and 19th century did not put an end to the Norwegian state's attempts to neutralise what it perceived as internal and external threats. The development of North Norwegian regionalism outlined in Section 6.2 must be approached with this in mind. As Niemi (2007: 83) contends, the North Norwegian regionalist project which first emerged in the second half of the 1800s was best understood "as an extension of and giving greater depth to nation-building and nationalism" in which "the national project was not completed until the regional mosaic of the nation had been illuminated" – though it also challenged the hegemony of the

nation and visions of national homogeneity. The name itself, North *Norway*, clearly signalled that "the region was Norwegian – a part of Norway" (Niemi, 2009: 41), not to be associated with ethnic minorities (Selstad, 2003a: 16). Zachariassen (2008: 135) similarly argues that North Norwegian regionalism has at times gone hand-in-hand with the wider nation-building project – but that this relationship should be viewed as contested and at times in conflict with other regional projects:

> North Norway as a region has developed through a hegemonic struggle between different kinds of region- and nation-building projects inside and outside the region. North Norwegian regionalism was one of those projects, but there have always been other and different kinds of political, economic, cultural, social and (to a certain extent) ethnic and minority projects as well.

Overall, to the extent that the North Norwegian regionalist project can be said to have been aligned with nation-building processes of this era, rather than a threat to it, its role as a *Norwegian* regional identity must be approached in connection with the Norwegian state's maintenance of an active assimilation policy of 'Norwegianisation' towards Sámi and Kven populations from around 1850 to 1980. This is a policy that has been described as "inseparable from the emergence of strong nation states" in the period (Minde, 2003: 122-123). The Norwegianisation policy aimed at actively limiting the use of Sámi and Kven languages among schoolchildren, who were instead to be taught Norwegian. The use of boarding schools and a work prohibition aimed at teachers with Sámi or Kven background were among the measures that were used to this end, in some places continuing into the second half of the twentieth century (ibid: 132). While the policy of assimilation was initially motivated by the state in terms of a 'civilising' mission, nation-building, and welfare policy, soon security policy and national considerations in the context of the so-called 'Finnish peril' (*den finske fare*), the view between around 1860 and 1940 that Finland constituted a military threat, became important to the state's decision-making, increasing both budgetary allocations and the severity of the policy (ibid: 127). Additionally, active Sámi opposition to Norwegianisation as well as "national agitation" related to the end of the Norwegian-Swedish union in 1905 were also listed as reasons for further measures (ibid: 129-130).

Another dimension of the Norwegian state's relation to Sámi and Kven populations was ethnic discrimination related to land. Since the mid-1800s, the central authorities actively pursued the goal of increasing the share of ethnic Norwegians in Finnmark. This was combined with the creation of barriers to land

purchases in certain Sámi and Kven areas (NOU 1994: 21: 93-95). In particular, a 1902 law (*Jordloven*) stipulated that command of the Norwegian language was a requirement to purchase land, as was it to inform about one's ethnic background and to give the property a Norwegian name (ibid). In combination with the state's cartographic practices, this had implications for the Norwegianisation of both local place names and surnames, as documented in a recent report by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Sannhets- og forsoningskommisjonen, 2023). The erasure of Sámi and Kven place names from the map, and its silencing and subjugating effects (Helander, 2009), has subsequently been the object of decolonial resistance, for instance in the maps of Sámi artist Keviselie/Hans Ragnar Mathisen in the 1970s (Stephansen, 2017). Such strategies highlight the existence of Sámi (and Kven) place names (Figure 6.5) beyond for instance the municipalities that officially use bi- or trilingual names.

Figure 6.5 Sápmi (compare Figure 5.1)
Source: Nordregio (2015). Cartographer: Johanna Roto. Data sources: Sámi place names: O. Korhonen (FI, NO, SE) & J. Sergayeva (RUS). Topography: EEA 2014.

The political conflict that erupted in the late 1970s and early 1980s over hydropower development in core Sámi areas, commonly known as the Alta conflict, is considered a shift in state policy towards the Sámi (e.g., Eira, 2013), materialised in for instance the subsequent establishment of the Sámi Parliament, *Sámediggi*, in 1989, and Norway's ratification of the ILO Convention on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 1990. One consequence of this shift for Finnmark in particular was related to ownership of land and water in the region. The Finnmark Act (*Finnmarksloven*), which came into force in 2006, transferred ownership of 95% of Finnmark's area from the state-owned enterprise *Statskog* to the local landowning body *Finnmarkseiendommen Finnmárkkuopmodat* ('the Finnmark Estate'), known in short as FeFo. Half the board is elected by Finnmark (between 2020 and 2023 Troms and Finnmark) County Council, while the other half is elected by the Sámi Parliament. The purpose of the Finnmark Act is, as Section 1 in the Act outlines, to

> […] facilitate the management of land and natural resources in Finnmark in a balanced and ecologically sustainable manner for the benefit of the residents of Finnmark and particularly as a basis for Sami culture, reindeer husbandry, use of non-cultivated areas, commercial activity and social life (Justis- og beredskapsdepartementet, 2018).

Additionally, a commission (*Finnmarkskommisjonen*) was established in 2008 with the aim to identify rights of use and land ownership based on long-term use. As a result of this, Karasjok municipality was recently recognised as the landowner of the majority of its area in April 2023, and two other municipalities (Tana and Kautokeino) are expected to follow suit (Horn, Buljo, et al., 2023). Altogether, these developments around rights to land and water have, according to Olsen (2010: 113), been accompanied by a shift in perception about Finnmark as having constituted a frontier and a commons, to a recognition of existing, collective Sámi rights that were previously ignored in the state's justification of its land ownership. This, Olsen argues, has also had implications for relations between majority and minority populations in Finnmark, and has complicated former narratives about Finnmark's domination by outside forces to also recognise unequal relations and complicity in the state's practices within the region.

As Eira (2013) outlines, this must also be understood in light of for instance the Labour Party's historic political hegemony in the region, and its homogenising approach to development and equality in the sense of sameness (*likhet*) (also Abram, 2018). Together, this reflects how for example the North Norwegian identity has at different times and for different reasons been defined in relation to

the southern (hence emphasising the *North* Norwegian, including the Sámi), or in relation to the Sámi (emphasising the North *Norwegian*) (Fulsås, 1997: 220-221).

6.4 Between geopolitics and societal development

In the sections above, I have sketched out a brief contextualisation of the geo-historical institutionalisation of Finnmark as a region, with reference to recent as well as more distant historical events and processes. As mentioned, this summary is partly guided by themes and events that key informants – as well as the written empirical material – have stressed as important, and as such, while providing only a partial history, it is meant to offer the necessary context for situating the following analysis historically and geographically. In this final section, I will briefly touch on some key dimensions of regional policy as it relates to Finnmark today – as well as how documents such as Norway's 2017 *Arctic Strategy – between geopolitics and social development* indicate the continued geopolitical logic of regional policy in the north.

Before the 2020 merger, Finnmark county was the largest in Norway by area, and the smallest by number of inhabitants, with a population of 75 863 spread over 48 631 km² in 2019 (Statistics Norway, 2022). Put into perspective, this constituted some 1.4% of the country's population, and around 15% of its total area. No municipalities in Finnmark scored above the national average of 74.5 in the most recent 'district index', which considers the geographical disadvantages associated with long distances and sparse settlement structures, along with the societal challenges that are acknowledged as common consequences of these (Figure 6.6).

All of Finnmark's eighteen municipalities, along with seven municipalities in North Troms, additionally constitute a special financial area (*tiltakssonen*) where different regional policy instruments apply, most significantly a payroll tax exemption under a certain level, as well as individual measures such as reduced income tax and partial student loan forgiveness (e.g., Agnell et al., 2012; Vennemo et al., 2022). As will become apparent in Chapter 7, the region's 'peripherality' in these terms were among the factors that presented Finnmark as a key candidate for merger in the 2020 reform.
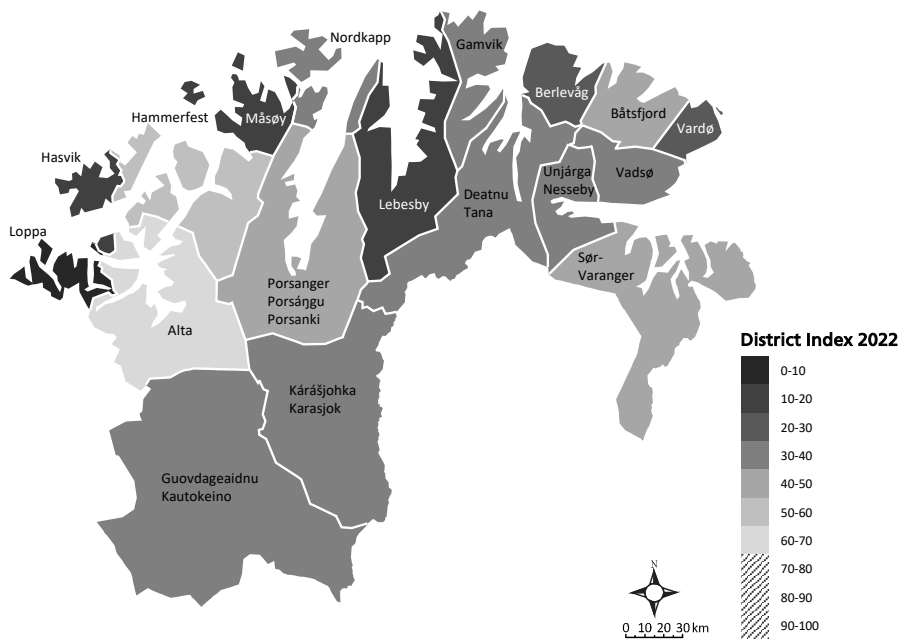
Figure 6.6 The 2022 District Index for municipalities in Finnmark
Data: Kommunal- og distriktsdepartementet (2022). Base map: Kartverket (CC BY-SA 3.0 NO).

It is also important to underscore that Finnmark is politically, culturally, and economically embedded in transnational and supranational regional spaces, including the multi-layered space of northern Europe (cf. Adams, 2012). Over time, Norwegian foreign policy in the north has shifted in focus and content: from the Barents region initiative of the 1990s, to a High North 'euphoria' in the 2000s, to a growing interest in the Arctic in more recent years (Aasjord and Hønneland, 2019). Though cross-border interaction and cooperation in the region had already been taking place for a long period, the Barents Euro-Arctic Council was formally established in 1993 on the initiative of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In establishing such an institution, the ministry sought to establish the story that "with communism gone, building a region would not be a new undertaking at all, but a question of re-establishing what was historically 'natural'" in terms of relations with Russia (Neumann, 2002: 641).

In addition to the creation of the intergovernmental Barents Euro-Arctic Council for representatives of Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, the EU, and

Russia (up until September 2023), the Barents Regional Council was established to act as an interregional forum for regional government representatives in northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia (also terminated in 2023), in a break with common practice. Neumann (2002: 644) argues that as a result, "the discourse on local politics in Northern Norway […] was changed by a new relationship to diplomacy and the foreign ministry" – as were working practices within the northern county councils. This would have been the case in Finnmark, which additionally houses the International Barents Secretariat (a body that supports the official Barents cooperation) and the Norwegian Barents Secretariat (which role has been to facilitate people-to-people cooperation between Norway and Russia, but today increasingly focusses on regional cooperation with Sweden and Finland) in Kirkenes, Sør-Varanger (The Norwegian Barents Secretariat, n.d.; Utenriksdepartementet, 2023). The northern counties' role in foreign policy has also been used locally to strengthen their legitimacy as administrative units in the context of ongoing debates about the future of the regional level of government (Chapter 2). Finally, the positioning of especially East Finnmark as a borderland is also expressed in for instance regional planning, local residents' identities, and everyday perceptions of the border and Russia (e.g., Lynnebakke, 2020; Olsen, 1996; Viken et al., 2008), and in the economic impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on the local economy (e.g., Horn, Estenstad, et al., 2023).

On this basis, it is no surprise that the subsequent policy shift towards the High North, or *Nordområdene* ('the northern areas'), caused some degree of internal rivalry in North Norway between Finnmark's "Barents practitioners" and the Tromsø-based, more Arctic oriented environment (Aasjord and Hønneland, 2019: 175). The shift towards the High North was accompanied with the positioning of the region – though vaguely defined in geographical terms – as Norway's most important strategic area – symbolically represented by flipping the map on its head to centre the Barents Sea (Pedersen, 2018). Petroleum discoveries in the Barents Sea have been central in High North discourse (Jensen and Skedsmo, 2010), but also for the mobilisation of regional identity discourse on two subnational scales in terms of who these resources should benefit economically: Finnmark or North Norway as a whole (Fitjar, 2013). As discussed further in Chapter 7 in relation to the influence of High North policy on the 2020 regional reform, another of its significant features is its dual emphasis on foreign policy and domestic regional development.

Finally, the Arctic has also been the subject of a decades-long history of active region-building at the international scale (Keskitalo, 2007), including the 1996

establishment of the intergovernmental Arctic Council, currently chaired by Norway in the 2023–2025 period. Interestingly, however, as Medby (2018: 116) observes, states' claims to 'being' Arctic are relatively new; "it is only recently that the Arctic region has been publicly re-articulated as anything but distant, exotic, and even threatening, far from the imagined 'homeland' of the eight Arctic states". On Norway's part, Aasjord and Hønneland (2019: 213) view the country's most recent rhetorical shift towards the Arctic as signalling a move "from the near abroad to the circumpolar Arctic, out of Russia's clammy hands and into the global community". Growing identification with the Arctic region may also be a reflection of interest in the Arctic internationally (e.g., Dodds, 2010, 2015; Steinberg et al., 2015; Väätänen and Zimmerbauer, 2020).

Altogether, though Finnmark's embeddedness in subnational and supranational regional structures have changed over time, what remains consistent is that the Norwegian state's approach to the north, and to Finnmark, has been shaped by geopolitical considerations; be it territorial disputes with neighbouring states in the past or the establishment of intergovernmental cooperation in more recent times. As the analysis in the following empirical chapters will touch on, this emerges as a central theme in the Norwegian government's motivation for a regional merger between Troms and Finnmark – but also in the local resistance mobilised against it.

7 State-led region work

The institutionalisation of a region is a contested and political process, whether this plays out in highly explicit or more implicit ways (Chapter 3). Regional reforms, and particularly territorial mergers, are no exception. Such reforms, and the rupture of 'business as usual' they represent, can be understood in terms of multiple, simultaneously ongoing processes, as others have remarked (e.g., Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013: 32). Mergers constitute a form of regional de-institutionalisation process, but do not completely de-institutionalise a region. Regional reforms also involve active institutionalisation attempts centred around the production of new regional spaces, which, if successful, become recognised in the socio-spatial consciousness over time. Such regional institutionalisation attempts may furthermore provoke counter-institutionalisation efforts by both regional elites and grassroots initiatives aimed at challenging and resisting 'top-down' regionalisation processes. Consequently, a regional reform involves more than just state actors and formal political contexts (Chapters 8 and 9), though they constitute a central part of these processes.

As the first of three empirical chapters, this chapter addresses how state-led regionalisation processes, such as territorial mergers, have been enacted discursively in Norway. The direct region work necessitated by the implementation of a regional reform – relying, as it does, on practical argumentation within a policy process and wider political context – contributes to foregrounding the discursive struggles taking place over the regions in question. To this end, this chapter explores the Norwegian government's institutional region work associated with its implementation of the contested regional merger between Troms and Finnmark counties in 2020. The analysis is based on a selection of documentary sources, which ranges from government white papers (called *Meld. St.*) and propositions to the parliament (draft bills and resolutions) (*Prop. L/S*) to committee recommendations (*Innst. L/S*) and official reports, also called green papers (*NOU*). A substantial part of the analysis in this chapter draws on and further develops the findings of a previously published article (Gulbrandsen, 2023).

The chapter is structured in the following way. First, the chapter introduces the political aims and rationale of the 2020 regional reform. To better contextualise this, the reform is situated geographically and historically in its national and European context. Following this, the chapter delves into the empirical analysis, which centres on four themes emerging from the analysed government documents. The first two themes relate to the more abstract discourses on space which underpin the government's arguments for regional reform overall. Hence, they address the influence of a new regionalism logic, but also identity regionalism, on the government's rationale for pursuing fewer, larger regions. The final two themes are more closely related to the concrete spatial discourses supporting the proposed and implemented amalgamation of Troms and Finnmark counties. This part of the analysis addresses how the North Norway region as a whole became a candidate for merger, represented as a 'special case' within the reform process due to regional development and foreign policy considerations. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the theoretical implications of approaching a regional reform through the lens of region work, illustrating, for example, how direct and indirect region work can interact in both complementary and contradictory ways.

7.1 A brief introduction to the 2020 regional reform

The regional reform which was implemented on 1 January 2020 was initiated by Prime Minister Erna Solberg's minority government, made up of a coalition between the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, with additional parliamentary support from the Christian Democratic Party and the Liberal Party. A parliamentary request in June 2014, Innst. 262 S (2013–2014), asked the governing parties to review the responsibilities held by the regional level of government in connection with an already initiated municipal reform. The idea of reform was subsequently proposed in April 2016 in the white paper Meld. St. 22 (2015–2016) *New elected regions – role, structure and functions*. The stated aims of the reform were improved sectoral collaboration and allocation of responsibilities, less bureaucracy and improved efficiency, as well as a diffusion of decision-making power and strengthening of local democracy. Overall, the goal of the reform was to "facilitate positive societal development in all parts of the country, based on regional advantages, conditions and priorities" by empowering the new regions to act as cross-sectoral initiators and coordinators of regional development to a greater extent than before (ibid: 6).

The establishment of "larger and more functional regions" wherein the regional structure better corresponds to "the societal challenges [it] is tasked with solving" was put forward as a necessary precondition for transferring new responsibilities and succeeding in these goals (ibid: 5). In connection with these aims, the existing nineteen political-administrative counties at the regional scale were invited to initiate a process of investigating possible merger options already in July 2015, with the goal to make decisions by December 2016. The *New elected regions* white paper suggested that around ten regions would be most appropriate, as it would reflect current functional areas more closely, enable better professional environments, and strengthen coordination with the regional state (ibid: 10). A regional structure based on between five and seven larger units was, in contrast, seen as a potential hindrance to effective "proximity and dialogue with municipalities and the business sector" (ibid: 35). The following criteria for establishing the new regional units were thus proposed in the white paper:

> The regions should form *functional units*. As a general rule, continuous housing and labour markets should not be divided. Areas that are economically interlinked should be located in the same region. [...]

> A regional elected level that more closely matches the *boundaries of knowledge institutions and state infrastructure and resource management agencies* can better facilitate cooperation and coordination of efforts. Through their own tasks, planning and development work, the regions should be able to maintain an overarching view and assess various measures and consequences against each other. [...]

> The regions should have a *population base that enables broad professional environments* with the capacity and expertise to handle current and future tasks and functions, and that citizens in all parts of the country can receive good services (ibid, emphasis added here and throughout the chapter).

The governing parties secured a majority vote on the proposed mergers in the parliament on 8 June 2017, when the committee recommendation Innst. 385 S (2016–2017), based on the draft resolution Prop. 84 S (2016–2017) *New partitioning of the elected regional level*, was up for discussion. The Troms-Finnmark merger was not formally proposed in the committee recommendation, but was included during the following parliamentary debate. The committee recommendation made clear, however, the governing parties' preference for (and political agreement about) a Troms-Finnmark merger (Innst. 385 S [2016–2017]: 49). The distribution of votes for the six mergers under consideration was split in

two blocks, reflecting the governing parties (the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, together with the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party) and the opposition (the Labour Party, the Centre Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Green Party), apart from in the case of the merger between Vest-Agder and Aust-Agder counties, which was supported nearly across the board.

The reform was subsequently implemented on 1 January 2020, together with the already ongoing municipal reform. One merger, between Nord-Trøndelag and Sør-Trøndelag counties, was already completed on 1 January 2018, after a mutual decision by the respective county councils in April 2016. Together, the implemented mergers resulted in a new regional structure consisting of eleven counties (Figure 7.1). Four regional units were maintained without changes: Rogaland, Møre and Romsdal, and Nordland counties, as well as Oslo, which as the capital city is a municipality performing the same function as a county.
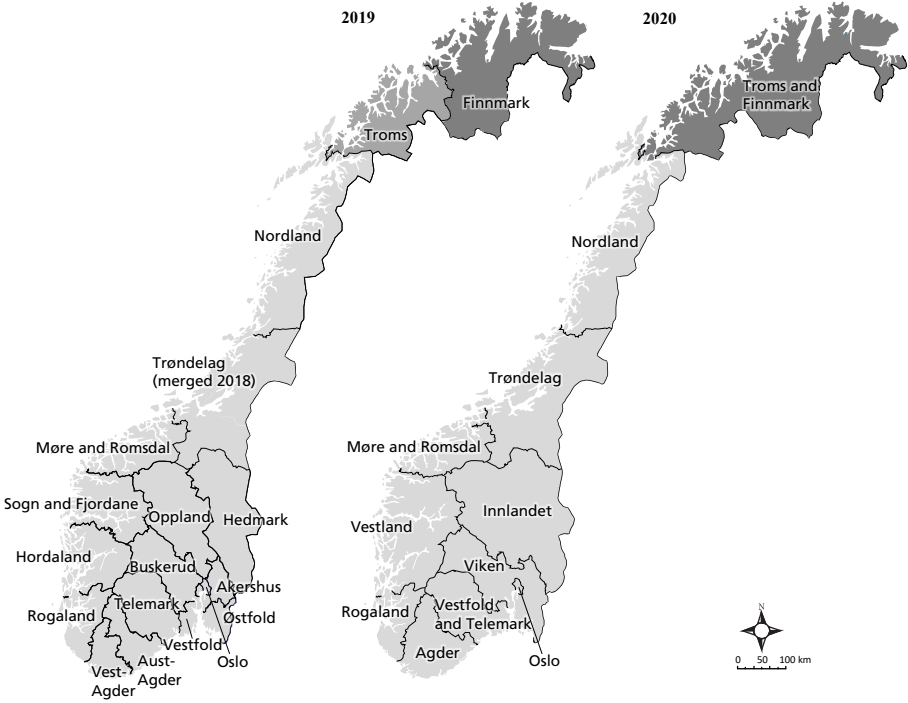
Figure 7.1 County structure
Source: Gulbrandsen (2023). Base map: Kartverket (CC BY-SA 3.0 NO).

As indicated by the divided parliamentary vote, however, and as will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 8, the reform has been politically contentious. Committee members from the Labour Party, the Centre Party, and the Socialist Left Party warned that they would be open to altering so-called 'compulsory decisions' (*tvangsvedtak*) about mergers that lacked local support if they gained a majority in the parliamentary election in autumn 2017 (Innst. 385 S [2016–2017]: 50).

The ultimate consequence of this was realised following the change in government to a Labour Party and Centre Party coalition with support from the Socialist Left Party that eventually took place after the 2021 parliamentary election. On 12 May 2022, the Støre Government introduced the draft resolution and bill Prop. 113 LS (2021–2022) *Dissolution of counties […] and changes to the Local Government Boundaries Act*, laying the ground for the dissolution of Troms and Finnmark County, as well as Viken, and Vestfold and Telemark counties on 1 January 2024. This resulted in a regional structure consisting of fifteen counties (Figure 7.2). Just as the mergers that took place four years prior were time-consuming and resource-intensive, so the dissolution process has promised to be (NRK, 2022; Troms og Finnmark fylkeskommune, 2022), reflected in debates around who should carry the economic cost of this (e.g., Gjerde, 2022; Sandvik, 2022).

While the scope of these regional mergers has been unprecedented in Norway, the *idea* of reforming the regional level of government is far from new, neither in Norway nor in a European perspective more broadly (Chapter 2). This can be observed in different reform waves. In the mid-1970s, the regional scale in Norway underwent extensive reform which introduced elected county councils, independent county administrations, and the right to taxation, transforming the regional scale of government from an arena for municipal collaboration into an independent political actor (Hansen and Stigen, 2012).

Since the 1990s, however, a gradual shift from the counties (*fylker*) towards larger regional units with historical roots (*landsdeler*) within public administration and political discourse has taken place (Baldersheim, 2003). The term *landsdel* has varied in meaning historically, but today generally refers to five socio-cultural regional units without a political or administrative function: Nord-Norge, Trøndelag, Vestlandet, Sørlandet, and Østlandet (Selstad, 2003a). These share similarities with, but differ in number to the six (seven pre-2020) NUTS 2 statistical regions, which are sometimes also referred to as *landsdeler* (e.g., Statistics Norway, 2020).

Figure 7.2 County structure from 2024
Source and cartography: Kommunal- og distriktsdepartementet (2022b).

Baldersheim (2003) argues that this shift towards larger regional units in public administration can be observed in debates around the role of the counties and potential reform models within the political parties and in a string of official reports and white papers in the early 2000s (e.g., NOU 2000: 22 *On the division of responsibility between state, regions and municipalities*; St.meld. nr. 31 [2000–2001] *Municipality, county, state – a better division of responsibilities*; St.meld. nr. 19 [2001–2002] *New tasks for the local democracy – regional and local level*). Moreover, the shift is reflected in the move of specific areas of responsibility away from the counties, such as the specialist health care services in the early 2000s (for a more detailed overview of proposed and implemented reforms, see Selstad, 2003b).

A move away from the counties can also be observed in the current organisation of state level institutions – for instance the four regional health authorities (Chapter 9) – which tend to be organised in larger geographical units (Hansen and Stigen, 2012). Finally, a concrete sign of change was the initiation of a regional reform (*forvaltningsreformen*) under the centre-left Stoltenberg Government formed by a coalition between the Labour Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Centre Party in 2005. The reform was implemented in 2010; however, the ambition of large-scale mergers initially put forward as a viable alternative in the 2006 white paper St.meld. nr. 12 (2006–2007) *Regional advantages – regional future* was eventually abandoned for a weaker reform which delegated some new functions to the counties (Blom-Hansen et al., 2012).

Among the political parties, positions on the role of the regional scale vary. On the one end of the spectrum, some parties advocate for a two-level structure based on municipalities (*kommuner*) and the national state. Notably, the governing parties that initiated the current reform, the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, both take this standpoint. On the other end of the spectrum, parties such as the Centre Party wish to strengthen the legitimacy of the political-administrative counties by transferring more substantial functions and resources to the regional scale – thus embedding the three-level structure more deeply in the country's political system. The Labour Party, too, supports a three-level structure, but this has been subject to internal disputes, for instance coinciding with the move of the specialist health care services from the counties to the state (Gjertsen, 2005; Selstad, 2003b). Struggles over the survival of the regional scale of government has in other words played out on a political battlefield characterised by 'modernists' on one hand and 'traditionalists' on the other; or in more ideological terms, between a neoliberal ideal of a slimmed down state and growth-focussed city-regionalism, and regionalism based on ideals of grassroots democracy, regional policy, and expansion of the social democratic state (Selstad, 2003b). At the time when the current regional reform was initiated, however, a parliamentary majority supported the preservation of the three-level structure. This explains the paradoxical situation of the reform's implementers, who were principally against a three-level structure, and points to some of the reform's political limitations (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 6).

Efforts to create larger and more efficient units of local government through regional and municipal reform have also been commonplace in the European context, reflecting the emergence of the 'new regionalism' ideal (Chapter 2). This can for example be observed in reforms aimed at territorial restructuring in

connection with European Union accession in countries such as Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic (Bitušíková, 2002; Ferry, 2003; Yoder, 2003), in new public management-informed administrative reforms in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands (Kickert, 2003), and more generally, reforms aimed at rationalisation, economies of scale, and regional competitiveness in for example France (Bourdin and Torre, 2021). The rise of 'city-regions' and 'metropolitan cities' in policy discourse in countries such as England, Germany, and Italy also point to the current popularity of these spatial imaginaries among decision-makers (e.g., Harrison, 2010; Harrison and Growe, 2014a; Longo and Mobilio, 2016; Sykes and Nurse, 2021).

Other Nordic countries have also undergone reforms or reform attempts in the same period (Harbo, 2015), perhaps most notably Denmark's extensive structural reform of municipalities and regions in 2007 (e.g., Blom-Hansen et al., 2012; Bundgaard and Vrangbæk, 2007; Krogh, 2011; Vrangbæk, 2010). Meanwhile in Sweden, though two regional mergers took place in the late 1990s, and an administrative regional reform was finalised in 2019, official inquiries into a new regional structure with fewer, larger units both in 2007 and 2016 did not lead to any further amalgamations (e.g., Blom et al., 2022; Jensen and Leijon, 2000; Lidström, 2020; Stegmann McCallion, 2016). In Finland, though preceded by a period of voluntary mergers, attempts at large-scale municipal reform were abandoned in 2015, while a health- and social care reform was implemented in 2023, establishing twenty-two elected welfare counties (e.g., Kangas and Kalliomaa-Puha, 2022; Moisio, 2012; Sandberg, 2015; Sjöblom, 2020).

Altogether, regional reform processes – be they successfully implemented or abandoned due to lack of popular and political support – clearly remain high on the political agenda in Norway and beyond. They reflect a search for solutions to complex contemporary challenges, from domestic welfare state pressures to the need for regions to remain or become economically competitive. Though the specific rationales and political-economic contexts of state-led regionalisation have changed over time (Loughlin and Peters, 1997), an overarching logic can still be observed in the past few decades:

> In the 1990s it was a global mosaic of regions […], then in the 2000s it was a network of city-regions […], and now in the 2010s it is a brave new world of competitive megaregions […] which are to be found front and centre of powerful and appealing 'new regionalist' claims that the nation-state, and the wider state system more generally, are being supplanted in globalization (Harrison and Gu, 2021: 79).

In what follows, I provide an analysis of the Norwegian government's rationale for regional reform in general, and the merger of Troms and Finnmark counties in specific, as laid out in a selection of government documents.

7.2 Reforming the regional scale

Regions fit for a new, complex age

As I have outlined above, the political and administrative organisation of the regional scale in Norway has been on the agenda for several decades. Indication that the idea had finally matured sufficiently since the previous attempt at mergers some ten years earlier is reflected in the suggestion in *New elected regions*, the government white paper first introducing the 2020 reform, that "time is ripe for a reform that creates larger and more functional regions" in which "the regional structure must be in accordance with the societal challenges the elected regional level is meant to solve" (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 5). This white paper makes the argument that the existing regional system is no longer fit for purpose; being structurally archaic and functionally obsolete, it is portrayed as a barrier to efficient regional governance. Reference to the age of the regional system and the minimal changes to its structure since 1838 is central to this claim (ibid: 5-6) – as is the comparison between its outdatedness and the development of "modern Norway":

> Communications and infrastructure, business structures and settlement structures have changed radically. We interact in a different way and at a different speed than only a short while ago. The complexity in society has increased, and many of today's central societal challenges cross administrative boundaries and move across sectors (ibid: 6).

This comparison places the relative historical 'permanence' of the regions as an obstacle to 'keeping up' in an age which, in sharp contrast to the past, is portrayed as characterised by uninterrupted flow. This argument becomes the key problem representation in the government's justification of the reform – and, importantly, resonates with the multi-partisan desire to reform the regional scale of government, as seen in previous reform attempts and inquiries. Tensions between (old) political-administrative boundaries and (new) functional spatial patterns on the regional scale are as such presented as a limiting factor to growth and

efficiency. This concern is formalised in the first criterium for the reform, as listed above, relating to the ideal of overlapping functional and political-administrative regions (ibid: 35). Regions such as these, *New elected regions* argues, "lay the ground for taking care of current and future tasks and functions, and will provide the preconditions for a holistic policy development which maintains regional advantages and contributes to their growth" (ibid). Aside from a table displaying the incongruence between different regional state agencies and the counties, however, no maps or other visual representations are used to support the discussion of functional regions contra the political-administrative counties in the white paper (ibid: 37).

The problematisation of the county units as unfit for 'modern Norway', as outlined above, can be understood as underpinned by the logic of new regionalism in several ways. This, to recap, is the academic and policy discourse that places regions – or city-regions – as ideal centres of growth in a globalised economy, associated with decentralisation, emphasis on inter-regional competition, and neoliberal policy (Chapter 2). In line with this, the government's rationale for regional reform as presented in the white paper is primarily based on an understanding of the counties as economic units, and emphasises the need for increased competitiveness and realisation of regional advantages, also reflecting Keating's (2017) notion of competitive regionalism. Additionally, the regional scale is understood in the wider context of the rescaling of governance and economic networks (Swyngedouw, 2004), and the move from spatial Keynesianism to knowledge-based economisation (Moisio, 2018: 121-122), seen in statements regarding the regions' intended role in societal development:

> The government will facilitate growth in all of Norway. National competitiveness depends on a private sector that can *compete in global markets.* Businesses in turn depend on *the region being able to attract skilled labour,* whether it is people with higher education or industry-specific skilled worker- and manufacturing expertise. This requires *each region to realise its potential.* The nature of this potential varies from region to region (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 19).

While this is a common way of approaching regions in the context of government policy, there are also instances when the competitive regionalism lens comes into conflict with alternative regional conceptions. This can for instance be seen in the distinction between logics of neoliberal discipline and regional identity identified among regional bureaucrats in the Norwegian regional reform context (Myksvoll et al., 2022). Because such interpretive frames or conceptions of regions are indicative of the values, logics, and knowledges that underpin them, and play a

decisive role in the production of regions, their presence or absence in policy documents can inform us about the nature of an institutional actor's region work.

While there are examples of influence from new regionalism discourse in the white paper, *New elected regions* also gives an indication of other values and institutional constraints that the regional reform has been pursued in the context of. These are considerations which in some cases are inconsistent with or do not necessarily conform to the political and economic logic of new regionalism. One example of this is the constraints offered by institutional and legal frameworks such as the generalist municipality principle (which ensures that all municipalities perform the same tasks), guidelines for the distribution of responsibilities, and principles of financial and juridical management, outlined in the subsequent white paper *Tasks for new regions* (Meld. St. 6 [2018–2019]: 15–18).

Another example is the broader political context of the reform, including the political challenge of governing without a parliamentary majority, which was the case in much of the 2013–2021 period. This meant that while the two governing parties preferred a two-level government structure to three tiers of government, they did not have parliamentary support on this issue (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 6). The reform therefore constituted a political compromise between the governing parties' goal of reforming the regional level of government, and the multi-partisan desire to keep a three-level government structure – a compromise which is not unique in the Scandinavian context (cf. Krogh, 2011). The regional reform can therefore be said to reflect the relatively deep institutionalisation of the political-administrative county units in Norway, in spite of continuous debate about their role and function over the past decades (Baldersheim, 2003).

A final example of conflicting values and constraints can be seen in the decision not to include the capital city Oslo in an amalgamation with surrounding counties. This was allegedly "never on the table" during negotiations because it exemplified the government's ideal two-level municipality-state structure (Bredeveien and Kristiansen, 2018), but also reflects, as Lingsom (2017: 42) outlines, that the capital's "unwillingness to cede power and allow itself to be governed by others has been a well-known attitude for decades". Challenges around for instance transportation in the greater Oslo region, which constitutes a prime example of a housing- and labour market region that "should as a rule of thumb not be divided" according to the reform's criteria (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 35), is instead seen as best governed through inter-municipal agreements, specifically *byvekstavtaler* (Prop. 84 S: 49-50).

Altogether, the government documents discussed above display examples of institutional activism aimed at justifying the necessity of a regional reform in line with dominant forms of new regionalist discourse. This can first and foremost be observed in the reasoning behind why the regional scale is ripe for a reform facilitating efficiency and economic competitiveness achieved through larger political-administrative units. This primarily adopts an economic and relational conception of the region, emphasising new, complex, and more fluid patterns of interaction. Nonetheless, there is still a clear commitment to the political-administrative counties as regional development coordinators, despite rhetorical emphasis on porosity and flow. This stresses a perceived continued relevance of the "territorial mosaic of regional and subregional political-administrative units and boundaries" (Harrison, 2010: 24) in regional governance by the government, as opposed to a complete shift to for instance city-region initiatives.

Region-building through electoral districts

While I argue that the main problem representation underpinning the regional reform has rested on new regionalist discourse, identity-based regionalism and the political function of the regional scale are also addressed in these policy documents. This can be seen in the reform's aforementioned goal of strengthening local democracy and decentralising decision-making power (though as I discuss in Chapter 8, this claim was highly contested by opponents of the reform). This goal is based on the premise that people are less politically invested in the counties, compared to the municipalities and the national state. As the draft resolution *New partitioning of the elected regional level* establishes, "interest in the regional democracy is lower than interest in the local [municipal] democracy" (Prop. 84 S: 12). The reform is therefore argued to rectify this as a smaller number of larger units are seen to "create the foundation for a transfer of power and authority to the regional elected level, so that decisions are made closer to the inhabitants" (Meld. St. 6 [2018–2019]: 6).

In light of lacking political attachment to the counties in the population, however, the *New elected regions* white paper deems it necessary to propose certain measures to ensure the functioning of the new political-administrative regions. One of these measures is to ensure that the boundaries of electoral districts and the new regions overlap. As the white paper states,

> When electing a new regional level – a regional council – it would be natural to stick to the key principles that apply to county council elections today. Today, one

county constitutes one electoral district. One region and one electoral district from the beginning would create good opportunities for building a new region and a new common regional belonging (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 13).

In this sense, ensuring the overlap of electoral districts and the new regional units performs region work in several ways. While, as the white paper argues, it may eventually play a symbolic role in spurring the growth of a cohesive regional identity based on political participation tied to a common unit, it also more directly strengthens both the territorial and institutional dimension of the new regions by embedding their institutional structures in legislation and social practice. By extension, the overlap of electoral and regional boundaries enables actors to engage in "prosaic moments of *realpolitik*" wherein governments – or individuals – politically mobilise the region and regionalist ideology (cf. Jones, 2022: 49, emphasis in original).

From this perspective, it is significant that the boundaries of electoral districts were only changed in the context of regional, not national, elections. In fact, the implications of the regional reform for national elections remained unclear in the initial white paper *New elected regions*. This is because the number of electoral districts in national elections is defined in the constitution, and because a reduction from nineteen to eleven electoral districts would have significant consequences for geographical representation in parliament (Chapter 8). That is what was eventually concluded in the report of the Election Act Commission in 2020, *Free and secret elections* (NOU 2020: 6: 23):

> The current 19 electoral districts secure representation from the whole country to a higher degree than the new counties. The majority believes it is better to keep the current 19 electoral districts than to follow the new regional structure.

The statement of the commission reinforces the decision in the draft bill Prop. 76 L (2017–2018) *Changes to the Election Act* to retain the old county boundaries as electoral districts in the 2021 parliamentary election, adopted in the bill Lovvedtak 61 (2017–2018). As such, judgements about the significance of other considerations (such as geographical representation) seemingly placed a limitation on the development of the new regions' institutional shape, and following the reasoning in *New elected regions*, hence also on the development of a "common regional belonging" (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 13).

Altogether, the policy papers that laid the ground for the reform constitute examples of region work performed by the government that were both highly

formal, because of their political and institutional context, and predominantly direct, as they take the form of explicit region-building; practical argumentation for a specific type of competitive, efficient, and functional region. Specifically, one aspect of the government's institutional activism around the reform was aimed at facilitating identity attachment to the new regions, aided by the portrayal of the old counties as lacking in 'natural' regionalism (cf. Keating and Wilson, 2014). Ultimately, however, there were limitations placed on the government's ability to transform the institutional shape of the new regions, which reflects how regions remain "'thick with things' that are material and nonmaterial" (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017: 690).

In the case of North Norway in general, and Finnmark in specific, the government's argument about lack of attachment to the old political-administrative counties is particularly interesting, given how in the northern context, the counties have become gradually more important over time, partially spurred on by local resistance to mergers in the 2010 reform (Røvik, 2014). The significance of attachment to the county was for instance underscored in a consultative referendum in 2018 where 87% of voters in Finnmark County voted against amalgamation with Troms County (Figure 8.2) (Finnmark fylkeskommune, 2018). This was also reflected in a 2016 resolution by Finnmark County Council which was recounted in *New partitioning of the elected regional level* (Prop. 84 S: 31):

> Finnmark as a separate region is justified by […] the strong sense of identity attachment the people of Finnmark have to their own county.

Despite regional attachment to the county and resistance to the planned merger with Troms in Finnmark, however, it can be argued that the economic rationale for reform took precedence. As I will argue below, geopolitical ambitions in the north also seemed to guide the government's consideration of a unified northern region. The following section therefore looks more closely at how initial attempts to formally institutionalise a northern region took shape.

The formal institutionalisation of a North Norway region?

While *New elected regions* proposed ten as the ideal number of regions after the reform, the white paper did not put forward any specific suggestions for mergers. Rather, the government would "conduct an overall review of the situation and assess the regional structure in light of the aims of the reform and the criteria for

the regional partitioning" by early 2017, once the counties, which had been tasked with initiating independent explorations of possible mergers in July 2015, had adopted resolutions stating their preferred options (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 36). It is therefore noteworthy that a subchapter of the white paper, in a chapter outlining envisioned tasks for the new regions, is dedicated to North Norway under the heading 'The government's High North policy' (*Regjeringens nordområdepolitikk*). I argue that this form of region work has three key spatialising effects: it presents North Norway as a homogenous region, it prioritises the region's geopolitical role, and portrays the region as a 'special case' within the national context.

Firstly, the *New elected regions* white paper presents North Norway as a homogenous region, both in terms of its interests and challenges, which High North policy is aimed at addressing:

> Increased economic growth in North Norway faces particular challenges compared to the rest of the country, due to long geographical distances, small labour markets, many small businesses and business environments, limited access to skilled labour, and little access to seed and venture capital. A national policy for North Norway is meant to reduce these disadvantages and realise the region's potentials (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 61).

Stating, in this regard, that the government's goal is to make the region become "one of the country's most innovative and sustainable regions" (ibid), *New elected regions* interdiscursively reproduces a key narrative which featured significantly in the High North 'euphoria' of the 2000s (Aasjord and Hønneland, 2019) and the emphasis on northern 'challenges and opportunities' within this discourse (Strøksnes, 2006); also a characteristic of more recent policy documents such as the 2020 white paper *People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the north* (Meld. St. 9 [2020–2021]). *New elected regions* additionally calls for participation from below in this project, stating that "those who live in North Norway must be involved in shaping the development of their own region [*landsdel*]" (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016: 61]).

Whenever the term 'region' is used in this context, it notably refers to the North Norway *landsdel* rather than the three northern counties, Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark. By placing the *landsdel* region as the main regional actor in the document's subchapter and context of High North policy, a shift in discursive emphasis from one scale of governance to another is indicated. This mirrors what Røvik (2014: 29-30) calls "the North Norwegian consensus doctrine", the once

strong but now waning tradition that the larger region 'speaks' with one voice to gain a more powerful position in relation to external actors, be it the central government or private companies. As Røvik also points out, however, this doctrine has been based on the practice that North Norway is given *one* 'slice' of the bigger cake, a practice now challenged by the increasing 'countification' of the *landsdel*, that is, a growing differentiation between county-level interests within the north (ibid).

Secondly, the white paper's emphasis on High North policy frames the North Norway region in the context of an international political domain and signals that the government has a vested interest in ensuring that specific considerations related to the region's geopolitical role, along with societal development (the dual focus of High North strategy papers) are taken into account in the amalgamation process. The larger region is presented as the preferred scale of activity at the intersection of foreign- and domestic policy in the north, by highlighting the region's "forward position in the Arctic" and special role in High North policy, which targets "Norway's most important foreign policy interest area" (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 61).

This must furthermore be understood in light of the government's broader vision for the new political-administrative regions' active role in Europe and beyond, in a context where "globalisation and internationalisation erase the dividing lines between foreign and domestic policy" and the regions take on a greater international role (ibid: 27). The necessary size of the new regions is emphasised within this glocalisation narrative in respect to High North policy – larger regions and hence professional environments will enable North Norway as a whole to compete for "national and international resources" and "better capitalise on the opportunities the region [*landsdelen*] faces" (ibid: 61). Moreover, the white paper emphasises, larger regions can also facilitate greater political influence:

> A regional reform which leads to fewer and larger regions can create the foundation for more systematic cooperation between national authorities and the region [*landsdelen*]. This can also give the region [*landsdelen*] greater weight within High North politics" (ibid: 62).

While the three northern counties are discussed as actors in themselves in the context of regionalised international cooperation such as in the Barents Regional Council (Chapter 6), they are also here seen as representing a wider North Norwegian common interest, understood in relation to the 'homogenous north' narrative above:

This [through membership of such institutions] is how international High North policy is built from below, based on the region's own premises" (ibid: 62).

Together, this illustrates how the complexity of interests and differences at the scale of the counties are abandoned in favour of a more cohesive regional image, onto which the three counties are superimposed in line with the aims of the reform. The political rationale for further empowering the North Norway region as an international actor hence provides an example of how state-led regionalisation processes can be understood as geopolitical projects (cf. Jonas and Moisio, 2018).

Finally, the *New partitioning of the elected regional level* draft resolution contributes to positioning North Norway as a 'special case' within the regional reform – a perpetual problem which must be dealt with in a "separate process" (Prop. 84 S [2016–2017]: 6), exemplified by the late inclusion of the specific Troms-Finnmark merger proposal as discussed in Section 7.1. This tendency is illustrated by the government's tentative map of the new regional structure in April 2017 in the same document, where all the new regional units except the northern counties Nordland, Troms, and Finnmark are laid out (Figure 7.3).

In the draft resolution, special care is taken to consider whether these three counties should become one or two units in the new regional structure, which is argued will "strengthen the balance between the counties on a national basis, and support the societal development work [*samfunnsutviklingsarbeidet*] in North Norway" (Prop. 84 S: 47). This points to the regional policy considerations of the reform, but more than that, it also highlights the importance of regional development in geopolitical terms. For instance, the "effectivization of public sector management in the north" (Meld. St. 9 [2020–2021]: 16) is elevated to a key priority area in *People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the north*, the Solberg Government's High North white paper from 2020, indicating the importance placed on the region and its growth for Norway's position in the Arctic:

> Norwegian interests in the Arctic must be asserted through a strong, viable and competent North Norway. That is why economy and societal development in the region is a *national matter*, with a rich foundation of resources contributing to economic growth in the whole country (ibid: 8).
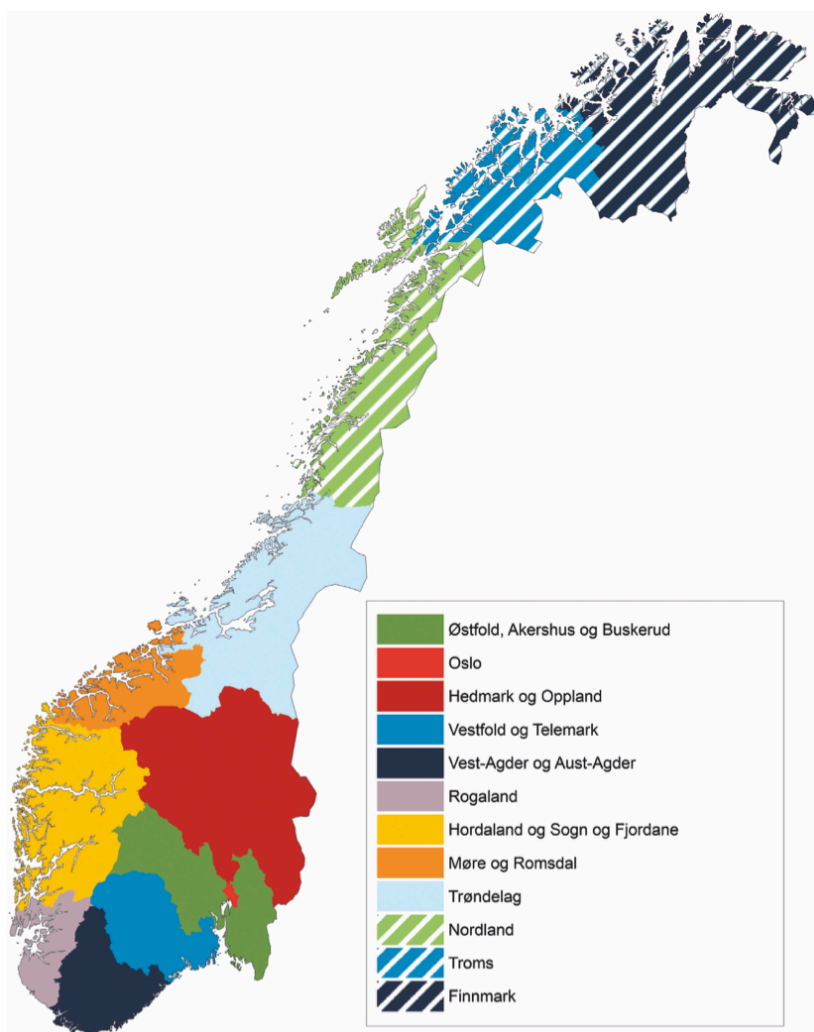
Figure 7.3 Government proposal of new regional units in 2017 (compare Figure 7.1)
Source and cartography: Prop. 84 S (2016-2017: 35) *New partitioning of the elected regional level*

Altogether, the analysis of how the government documents presented the rationale for regional mergers points to an institutional activism aimed at creating a political-administrative northern region on a *landsdel* basis – though the government's region work did not fully succeed in this regard. The arguments put forward by the government were primarily based on the foreign policy logic

central in its 'High North' discourse, but also contained traces of a regional development logic related to the region's particular challenges – the persistent 'North Norway problem' (Chapter 6). As such, the regionalisation process pursued through the regional reform illustrates how the political construction of regional spaces as state geopolitical strategy can be tied up with both the internationalisation of the state and domestically oriented 'national problems' (Jonas and Moisio, 2018).

Specifically, the examples highlighted above illustrate how discourses and their attached problematisations circulate across government ministries and policy documents. This can materialise in highly explicit intertextual ways, such as through the inclusion of an information box on the regional reform in the High North strategy (Nordområdestrategi, 2017: 12), and through repetition, for instance of the message that North Norway will be among the country's "most innovative and sustainable regions" across documents (e.g., Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 61; Meld. St. 9 [2020–2021]: 14). It can also materialise through more implicit interdiscursive relations, where the logic of regional economic development is combined with the preservation of national interests. This highlights how the intersection of foreign- and domestic policy objectives, in particular the blurred boundary between aims and policy measures directed at rural areas on the one hand, and the assertion of sovereignty in the Arctic on the other, contributed to positioning North Norway as a key scale for intervention in the regional reform.

Demographic size and geographical distance

Returning again to the importance placed on the congruence between political-administrative and functional regions in the *New elected regions* white paper, it is worth examining to what extent this ideal ran into trouble when facing the geographical realities of North Norway. As *New partitioning of the elected regional level* outlines in detail, the northern counties are characterised by long travel distances and demographically small but geographically large housing- and labour markets. As a whole, the *landsdel* constitutes more than a third of the country's area but less than ten percent of its total population (Prop. 84 S: 46). This poses a challenge for the reform criteria outlined in *New elected regions*, which propose that the new counties should constitute functional regions, coincide with the regional boundaries of state agencies and knowledge institutions, and have an inhabitant basis sufficient to enable service provision and professional

communities (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 35). This dilemma is addressed in the draft resolution Prop. 84 S (2016-2017) at length:

> The need for further evaluation of a new structure [referring to the question of partitioning] is particularly justified by two considerations – which can be contradictory when it comes to North Norway. On the one hand, the goal is to build counties that can take on a stronger societal development role […] It is therefore a question of securing geographical functionality, sufficient capacity and competence for new tasks and responsibilities, and good collaboration with the regional state and other regional actors. On the other hand is the question of which special considerations one must make regarding the long distances in the region [*landsdelen*], meaning consequences for the county's execution of its societal development role and dialogue and contact with municipalities, businesses and others.

This dilemma between demographic size and geographical distance underscores that not all the proposed reform criteria (or the values and considerations behind them) are necessarily achievable to the same degree; there are inevitable trade-offs.

An example of this can be seen in discussions of transferring new responsibilities to the counties in line with the subsidiarity principle, for which larger regional units with greater capacity and competence is set as a prerequisite in *Tasks for new regions* (Meld. St. 6 [2018–2019]: 15-16). Larger regions, *New elected regions* argues, are better able to "view functional areas in context", for instance by facilitating "better coordinated transport services and rational localisation of services where the boundaries currently run through continuous urban areas" (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 34). However, as the 2019 regional policy white paper *Living local communities for the future* points out, municipalities that are characterised as 'district areas' often constitute their own functional regions due to long travel distances and being sparsely populated – in fact, more than half of these municipalities are northern (Meld. St. 5 [2019–2020]: 26). Judged by these criteria, North Norway is located on the opposite end of the spectrum as for example the capital Oslo in terms of constituting a coherent functional area (also Gundersen et al., 2019).

Together, geographical disadvantages and related societal challenges identified by the 'district index' (Chapter 6), sometimes necessitating government intervention in commercially unprofitable areas such as in the case of high-speed broadband (Gulbrandsen and Sheehan, 2020), challenges the ideal of the highly interconnected and economically rational unit of governance. This dilemma also highlights tensions between the traditional regional policy goal of maintaining

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dispersed settlements to prevent the depopulation of rural areas, and the intensification of these trends through decentral concentration at the regional scale, reflected in more recent emphasis on regional centres, larger urban areas, and their surrounding areas (Meld. St. 9 [2020–2021: 15]; cf. Baldersheim, 2003).

Ultimately, the issue of demographic size took precedence over geographical distance in the outcome of the reform, supporting the decision to merge Troms and Finnmark counties. Having two counties within North Norway, the governing parties argued, would lead to a "good balance between the counties" at approximately 240 000 inhabitants in Nordland and Troms and Finnmark counties respectively (Innst. 385 S [2016–2017]: 49). The merger was therefore to a higher degree justified by the third criteria of the reform – constituting a sufficient inhabitant basis for service provision and professional communities – than the challenges it may pose for the exercise of local democracy, and the local "knowledge of the region's characteristics, strengths and weaknesses" required by the regions' redefined role as coordinators of regional development (Meld. St. 22 [2015–2016]: 19).

This prioritisation coincided with the government's wider concern with the role of capacity- and competence building in regional growth; a significant theme in other recent white papers and reports, and another area in which policy documents pay particular interest to North Norway, reflecting Painter's (2013) argument that population characteristics at the regional scale have increasingly become a source of biopolitical concern and intervention. For instance, the 2017 High North strategy paper *Between geopolitics and social development* asserts that

> Good development and use of the inhabitants' competence and a system of education giving youth a solid foundation is crucial for the viability of business and social life in North Norway. North Norway is the region [*landsdel*] in Norway with the greatest imbalance between supply of and demand for labour. Businesses in North Norway have bigger challenges with recruiting competent and relevant labour than the rest of the country (Nordområdestrategi, 2017: 39).

The issue of supply and demand of labour becomes connected to levels of formal education, such as in the statement that "the region [*landsdelen*] has a lower level of education and quality in primary education than the rest of the country" and that "completion of upper secondary education is low, and lower in Sámi areas than in the rest of North Norway" (ibid: 40). The same issue is discussed in for instance the white paper *Living local communities for the future*, which highlights

that "the least central municipalities in Troms and Finnmark have the highest proportion of youth with only compulsory education" (Meld. St. 5 [2019–2020]: 92). *It is about Norway*, an official report on demographic trends in *Distrikts-Norge*, shows that this has long been an area of policy concern (NOU 2020: 15: 159–160), while *People, opportunities and Norwegian interests in the north* repeats the challenge of labour supply in the north, affirming it as one of the key areas of High North policy (Meld. St. 9 [2020–2021]: 15).

Together, these examples illustrate how the problem representation that North Norway is a region with special importance for the national interest, but at the same time a region in perpetual need for government intervention due to geographical and demographic challenges, contributed to positioning the *landsdel* as a key candidate for reform. As such, while a larger North Norway region did not become realised, the government's institutional activism around the Troms-Finnmark merger successfully mobilised a discourse which placed emphasis on industry needs and human capital development, giving the issue of demographic size priority over geographical distance when the reform was implemented.

7.3 Regional reform as an institutionalisation process

In this thesis, I approach regional reform as a set of processes which are situated within a broader and longer-term process of regional institutionalisation and are initiated by formal political actors. As a set of processes, a regional reform encompasses both territorial, symbolic, and institutional dimensions which are enacted or preformed in various ways, for example though legislation, mapping, institution-building, and practical argumentation. I argue that approaching regional reform in this way allows for a more geo-historically sensitive conception of these processes as being involved in the production of regional space, acknowledging the number of interrelated socio-spatial processes and practices taking place across different scales.

As indicated in the introduction of this chapter, research on merger processes have conceptualised mergers in terms of regional de-institutionalisation, focussing on how regions can eventually disappear from the social consciousness and regional system, even though they have been highly 'naturalised' at previous points in time (e.g., Frisvoll, 2016; Zimmerbauer et al., 2012, 2017; Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013). Such research has problematised the notion of de-institutionalisation by pointing out that the disappearance of certain institutional aspects of a region –

for instance administrative or political – does not by definition also cause the 'sticky' symbolic, identity-based dimension of a region to vanish (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). Various 'soft factors', such as regional identity and sense of belonging, have been shown to be key to the social reproduction of regions in a Norwegian context (e.g., Frisvoll and Almås, 2004; Frisvoll and Rye, 2009; Myksvoll et al., 2022). From this perspective, while the administrative (or political) role of a region certainly is a sign of its formal institutionalisation, this status is, as Paasi (1986: 130) notes, "not necessarily the most notable or most effective step as regards the social reproduction".

Moreover, regional reforms involve more than a process of de-institutionalisation (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013). As I show in the empirical analysis in this chapter, they also involve direct region work aimed at actively producing new regional spaces – the institutionalisation of regions. The contested and political nature of regional reforms, moreover, calls for examining counter-attempts at institutionalisation: direct region work that challenges state-led regionalisation processes. Here I use the notion of *counter-institutionalisation* (Chapter 3) to highlight the intentionality and political nature of region work shaped in response to and aimed at resisting particular regionalisation processes. Ultimately, from this perspective, the 'success' of a reform (that is, its ability to direct the process of regional institutionalisation in a particular way) is contingent on reformers' ability to establish hegemonic discourses and practices.

Returning, then, to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter regarding how state-led regionalisation processes such as territorial reforms have been enacted discursively in Norway, two main observations about institutional forms of region work emerge from the analysis. Firstly, the analysis emphasises the central role of the government's direct region work – its *institutional activism* – with regard to the 2020 regional reform and the merger of Troms and Finnmark counties. I argue that this dimension of region work was most visible in the government's argumentation for regional reform overall. In the first example presented in the analysis, the description of the regional system as a structurally archaic and functionally obsolete barrier to growth, competitiveness, and efficient governance constituted the primary problematisation behind the reform. These spatialising discourses closely aligned with what has been described elsewhere as an interpretive frame of competitive regionalism (Keating, 2017) or a neoliberal 'logic of discipline' (Myksvoll et al., 2022), generally underpinned by new regionalist policy discourse. Problem representations are of course never 'neutral' but are produced based on different sets of rationalities and knowledges.

Consequently, agenda-setting white papers can be understood as crucial resources in the production of authoritative knowledge claims about given states of affairs. As a form of institutional activism, the spatial problematisations made on this basis contributed to portraying the reform as an inevitable restructuring of the regional scale – but did not go as far as to dismantle the counties as the territorial vehicles of regional governance (cf. Harrison, 2010). Thus, while providing a common ground for multi-partisan support for *some* form of regional reform, also reflected in debates over the last decades (Chapter 2), the government's region work did not manage, and did not need, to gain the political opposition's support for implementing the most contentious of the proposed mergers because of its parliamentary majority at the time. The reform, in other words, eventually achieved only a shallow institutionalisation of the new regional structure, reflected in the subsequent dissolution of three merged counties in 2024 after a change in government in 2021.

Informing the same theme, the second example also gives an indication of the forms of *institutional activism* the government engaged in regarding the reform. Its call for building an overarching regional identity and regional belonging through the reorganisation of electoral districts points to the sophisticated institutional and legislative means available to actors in formal contexts of region work. However, the reorganisation only extending to regional and not national elections also points to its potential limitations. The constitutional definition of electoral districts in national elections, and the recommendation against such a change due to the consequences it would have for geographical representation in the parliament, prevented the new regions' institutional shape from gaining an additional layer. As a result, the old county structure was preserved in the context of national elections. In addition to these more institutional factors, however, it is also reasonable to question to what extent region-building measures such as these contribute to fostering regional belonging in the short term. While a region's political-administrative status may represent its most official form, it does not necessarily constitute the most effective strategy for its social reproduction; "much more important are the social institutions which are the whole time actively carrying out the reproduction of regional consciousness and impinge upon everyday practices by bringing the region to us […]" (Paasi, 1986: 130). Research suggests, for instance, that unless more cross-boundary 'proto-identities' are allowed to mature, mergers are likely to run into trouble (Frisvoll and Almås, 2004, 2014). This further emphasises the influence of not only easily identifiable acts of direct region work, but also the more diffuse and intangible effects of

indirect region work, especially in a regional context such as Finnmark where there exists a clear identity attachment to the regional scale.

Secondly, the analysis points to the influence of *institutional advocacy* on the regional reform. Specifically, I argue that overlaps in the continuum between direct and indirect region work are visible in the government's argumentation for the merger of Troms and Finnmark counties. For instance, as discussed in the third example in the analysis, the positioning of the North Norway *landsdel* as a candidate for merger based on its ostensibly harmonious interests and homogenous challenges highlights the interdiscursive influence of High North policy on the reform. This can be understood as a form of indirect, institutional advocacy because it was primarily the already well-established spatial discourses of High North policy that became adopted across government documents to support the logic of new regionalism applied to the North Norwegian context. As a political project, High North policy has created continuously self-legitimating structures that have contributed to its continuing relevance since the early 2000s; the phrase "the High North is Norway's most important strategic area of interest" remains as salient today as it was in 2013 and 2005 under different government coalitions (Pedersen, 2018; cf. Utenriksdepartementet and Kommunal- og distriktsdepartementet, 2023). The influence of High North policy is for instance evident in the explicit connection made between the case for a North Norway region and foreign policy interests in the north, which contributes to streamlining and hence further institutionalising the High North project through political-administrative units at the scale of the *landsdel*. It is in this dimension of the government's direct region work, and the indirect reproduction of the High North as an important strategic area to this end, that the geopolitics of state-led regionalisation can be most clearly observed (cf. Jonas, 2013).

The last example in the analysis also addresses this theme, further illustrating the influence of *institutional advocacy* on the regional reform. The deliberation around geographical distance and demographic size in the government documents showcases the interdiscursive adoption of logics of national interest and regional development connected to the northern 'exceptionalism' embedded in the High North political project. Specifically, the prioritisation of the issue of demographic size in the case of the Troms and Finnmark merger coincided with the government's broader focus on capacity- and competence-building, wherein northern societal and economic development is framed as a national concern. This highlights the symbiotic relationship that seemingly developed between interests around the regional reform. On the one hand, the reform was portrayed as an

opportunity for further institutionalising the High North political project in an envisioned North Norway region. On the other hand, the government's institutional activism relied in part on spatial discourses adopted from the dual foreign- and domestic policy logic of High North politics. Together, these examples illustrate how different forms of region work can appear highly complementary, especially when indirect region work is mobilised to support its direct counterpart through active region-building, while also pointing to the possibility for internal contradictions and dilemmas. The next chapter elaborates on the role of direct region work in more informal contexts than in the analysis above, by turning to one interest group's mobilisation of resistance against the Troms-Finnmark merger.

8 Region work and contestation

Following the analysis of region work involved in the implementation of a recent regional reform and the merger of Troms and Finnmark counties in the previous chapter, this chapter turns to the local efforts in Finnmark to prevent the amalgamation from taking place, and after its implementation, to have it dissolved. The aim of the chapter is therefore to address the question of how the state's regionalisation discourse is contested locally in Norway. While, as I will show, there was strong political resistance to the merger within parts of Finnmark County Council, the analysis specifically focusses on the role of a regional interest group, *For Finnmark*, in contesting the reform. As the analysis shows, while there were clear similarities between the interest group and the council's counter-discourse, there were also times in which the group took a stronger stance and critiqued decisions by elected regional politicians. From the analytical perspective adopted in this thesis, this is addressed by exploring what the less formal socio-spatial context of the group's region work afforded it in terms of producing a highly salient regionalist counter-discourse. The analysis is primarily based on texts published by *For Finnmark* along with key informant interviews, but also draws on other documentary sources to give an indication of the wider context of regional resistance to the merger.

The chapter is structured in the following way. First, it provides a brief overview of opposition to the Troms-Finnmark merger within the county council as well as within Finnmark's population in order to contextualise the reform's local reception. This section also presents the interest group *For Finnmark* in more detail and situates it within its local context. This is followed by an analysis of how the direct (but also indirect) region work of *For Finnmark* took shape in relation to the merger. The analysis specifically addresses the group's critique of what they perceive as the centralising effects of the reform, and the undemocratic process of its implementation. Furthermore, the analysis highlights how regional history has been mobilised by the group within these narratives, but also how the narratives have become embedded within broader societal discourses and centre-periphery contestation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the group's

region work as straddling institutional activism and strategic activism, enabled by its adoption of a multi-voiced discourse that performs different functions in different discursive contexts, indicating how the same actors may perform region work in a variety of ways. The conclusion also addresses the political, institutional, and material stakes of *For Finnmark*'s region work beyond the group's mobilisation of regional identity and the region's symbolic shape, questioning to what extent regional identity should be approached as an isolated 'factor', or seen as deeply related to other stakes of political struggle.

8.1 Political and popular opposition in Finnmark

The idea of an amalgamation of Finnmark with another county met resistance in Finnmark County Council from the very start, as reflected in a council decision in March 2015 (Finnmark fylkesting, 2015). This is not particularly surprising, given the county's 'traditionalist' attitude to the question of regional mergers in the previously discussed 2010 reform (Vebostad, 2013), which is perceived to have strengthened the county institutionally (e.g., Hamran, 2020; Røvik, 2014). The lack of local political support for a merger was further reflected in a decision adopted with 25 votes against 10 by Finnmark County Council on 7 December 2016, which was the result of the process of investigating merger options that all the counties had been invited to initiate in 2015. The protocol stated that "the county council decides that Finnmark shall remain as a separate region" (Finnmark fylkesting, 2016). Furthermore, in addition to outlining its view that the regional level of government should be strengthened through the reform and that mergers should take place on a voluntary basis, the county council decision emphasised that

> Finnmark as a separate region is justified by:
>
> - The maintenance of *decentralised structures*
> - Emphasis on the *principle of proximity* in terms of people and public agencies and institutions
> - Real *democratic development*
> - Maintenance of *sovereignty*, with emphasis on our border with Russia
> - *Ownership of land and water* in Finnmark
> - The strong sense of *identity attachment* the people of Finnmark have to their own county (ibid, emphasis added here and throughout the chapter).

The county council's justification as such highlights several arguments for the continued existence of Finnmark as a political-administrative region, which to a large extent directly address and attempt to oppose the government's institutional activism around the reform. Emphasis on decentralised structures, proximity, and local democracy, for example, reflects the dilemma between geographical distance and population size discussed in Chapter 7, in which the latter eventually took precedence in the reform. Arguments related to regional identity and local stewardship of land through the regional landowning body *Finnmarkseiendommen Finnmárkkuopmodat* (FeFo) points to strong institutional dimensions of the region, while reference to the assertion of sovereignty and the Norway-Russia border invokes the dual national security and societal development logic of High North policy, along with the county's role as a foreign policy actor in the north. As the analysis will show, these arguments are also reflected in the mobilisation of broader resistance to the proposed merger.

Another sign of political resistance to the Troms-Finnmark merger, which continued after the amalgamation had been officially passed in parliament on 8 June 2017, was a number of actions by the county council to stop or stall the implementation process. Among them were the council's initial refusal to establish and participate in a joint committee to oversee the merger with Troms County (*fellesnemda*), as well its decision to look into the possibility of initiating a legal process to contest the validity of the parliamentary decision, as detailed by Hamran (2020: 251). Another illustrative example was the council's refusal to replace the old counties' coats of arms with a new, common one, as was done in all other merged counties. This decision was motivated by the county council in the following way:

> Finnmark County Council notes that there is a majority in favour of repealing the forced merger in the new Troms and Finnmark County Council, and hopes that the repeal will take place after the 2021 parliamentary elections. The county council therefore considers it inappropriate to use a lot of human and financial resources to change the two existing coats of arms for both Troms and Finnmark, as we are still working towards reversal (Finnmark fylkesting, 2019).

As a result, Troms and Finnmark County would use its two existing coats of arms side by side (Figure 8.1), rather than one of the new coats of arms which had been selected by a jury of experts.

Troms og Finnmark fylkeskommune
Romssa ja Finnmárkku fylkkagielda
Tromssan ja Finmarkun fylkinkomuuni

Figure 8.1 Troms and Finnmark County coats of arms
Source: Troms og Finnmark fylkeskommune (2019)

While the refusal to adopt a common coat of arms stands out in comparison to decisions in the context of other mergers, the continued use of the old county names side by side, as done by one other merged county (Vestfold and Telemark), also signals an institutional resistance to the adoption of a common, regional symbolic identity – itself the result of extensive political and media debate (e.g., Furunes et al., 2017). Altogether, the active political resistance to the merger exercised by parts of Finnmark County Council ahead of the merger presents an example of regional institutional activism and acted as a roadblock to adopting new regional symbols, and by extension, institutions. This points to the resilience of the county as an institution, especially in terms of the legal and political powers it is endowed with, which in Finnmark were mobilised to prevent the 'formal' institutionalisation of an overarching symbolic shape for the soon-to-be merged counties.

Outside the formal political arena of the county council, discontent with the proposed Troms-Finnmark merger also became visible among the population of Finnmark in a local consultative referendum held on 14 May 2018. This referendum was held after the merger had officially been passed in parliament in June the year before. For this reason, not everyone has perceived the referendum to be a legitimate political process, and some have criticised the media for inadequate scrutiny (Interview 7, 26.04.2022). Among supporters, however, such as the county mayor from the Labour Party, the referendum was to be a strong signal to the government that seeing through with the merger would be highly unpopular (Hamran, 2020: 222). As such, the county council decided that a recently entered agreement with Troms County would be rejected, and that:

> A referendum will be held before 17 May 2018, with a yes or no vote to merge Finnmark with Troms.
>
> The merger process is stopped until the result of the referendum is ready (Finnmark fylkesting, 2018).

Of 59 625 eligible voters in Finnmark, 34 860, or around 58%, went to the urn in the referendum; in total, 87% voted against the merger, 12.3% voted in favour, and 0.7% left a blank vote (Finnmark fylkeskommune, 2018). Alta municipality had the highest percentage of 'yes' voters with 32%, while in fourteen out of nineteen municipalities, more than 90% voted 'no'. Overall, municipalities in West Finnmark along the border to Troms had a lower percentage of 'no' voters, although all the municipalities saw a majority vote against the merger (Figure 8.2).

Figure 8.2 Referendum results, pre-2020 county and municipal borders
Data source: Finnmark fylkeskommune (2018). Base map: Kartverket (CC BY-SA 3.0 NO).

While there was no referendum held in Troms on the merger with Finnmark, polls from two months before the referendum show that also Troms had a 73% majority against the merger, compared to Finnmark's 86% in the same poll. 21% were in favour (contra 10% in Finnmark). Finally, 50% of those polled in Troms wanted to continue resisting the merger, while 44% wanted to accept the parliamentary decision. In Finnmark, the respective numbers were 72% and 24% (Tomassen et al., 2018).

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Meanwhile, there was greater willingness in Troms County Council to go through with the merger. In the initial process of investigating merger options, the council expressed that "a strengthening of the elected regional level must be realised within one of the following alternatives": a North Norway region, for Troms to continue as a region by itself, and a Troms-Finnmark merger, and moreover, that "the new region's administrative centre will be Tromsø" (Prop. 84 S [2016-2017]: 29-30).

At a later stage – once the merger had been implemented but a forthcoming dissolution was becoming more and more likely, given the national election results in autumn 2021 – discussions arose in Alta regarding whether the municipality should join 'new' Troms County. This was the topic of a municipal consultative referendum on 10 May 2022. Of 17 096 eligible voters, slightly over 37%, or 6470 persons, in Alta voted. A narrow majority of 50.06% voted for Alta remaining in Finnmark, while 48.16% voted for becoming part of Troms after a dissolution of Troms and Finnmark County. 1.78% left a blank vote (Alta kommune, 2022).

Having briefly outlined how political and popular opposition to the Troms-Finnmark merger took shape in Finnmark County Council and in a local referendum, the chapter now turns to examining the role of a politically non-aligned (*tverrpolitisk*), member-based interest group called *For Finnmark* (also spelled *ForFinnmark*) in mobilising local resistance to the merger. *For Finnmark* was formally established in January 2018, after being founded in the wake of the 2017 parliamentary elections where the Solberg Government was re-elected. The group can be said to have roots in a regional political 'elite', reflected in parts of the group's leadership being former or current politicians from a range of political parties, including the Christian Democratic Party, the Liberal party, the Labour Party, the Centre Party, the Socialist Left Party, and the Red Party. This both includes members of parties that were in favour of the merger on the national level, and that were against it. In some cases, however, the group members are no longer affiliated with the political parties they were once active in. Their involvement in politics has nonetheless led critics to describe the group – along with the county council's attitude to the merger – as constituting a "party-political resistance" to the reform rather than a "people's rebellion" (Interview 7, 26.04.2022), and raises questions about to what extent the group should be discussed as an example of 'bottom-up' regional activism. For the purpose of this analysis, I therefore approach the interest group's counter-discourse as the discourse of a regional elite which implies certain power relations and discursive resources, all the while keeping in mind that state organisations, regional

governments, political parties, and interest groups are ultimately "peopled" by individuals (cf. Medby, 2018: 123).

For Finnmark's political mission has been to "work for Finnmark's interests and work to ensure that Finnmark County Council applies to the parliament to keep Finnmark as a separate region" (For Finnmark, n.d. a). In its own words, the group sought to do so by:

- Strengthening knowledge of Finnmark's history, culture, nature and society.
- Raising awareness of Finnmark's potential to develop further as a region in its own right.
- Stimulating debate on the challenges facing Finnmark.
- Contributing to more people getting involved in the efforts to maintain Finnmark as a separate region with its own elected body based on the current system for electing county councils and the parliament (ibid).

The group has communicated its message through several channels, including written entries on its own website, forfinnmark.no, as well as a Facebook page going by the same name. *For Finnmark* also runs a public Facebook group, originally titled 'We who want Finnmark county as a separate region' (*Vi som vil ha Finnmark fylke som egen region*), which has some 16 300 members in January 2024. The Facebook group's name was changed in late 2022, after the upcoming dissolution of the merger was decided, to 'Debate Finnmark' (*Debatt Finnmark*) in order to "facilitate broader debate about the New Finnmark County coming on 1 January 2024" (For Finnmark, 2022a).

The following analysis is primarily based on a collection of blog posts published on *For Finnmark*'s official website. The group published 156 entries between April 2018 and November 2021, of which the majority are original texts, and a minority reproduce texts such as political speeches or documents published elsewhere. The entries are written by a range of authors affiliated with the group to different degrees (from the leadership to supporters and members of related interest groups). Given the group's politically non-aligned character, narratives within the texts therefore do not always form an internally consistent voice. Rather, the sources can be better understood as a number of texts coming together to constitute a multivoiced or 'heteroglossic' discourse (Jaworski and Coupland, 2014), reflecting, for example, both technical, legal language as well as highly emotive language. The analysis is supplemented with in-depth key informant interviews.

Texts that are exclusively published elsewhere by the group, be it in traditional media outlets or on social media platforms, are not systematically included, nor are discussions by members of the public Facebook group or the Troms-based affiliated organisation *For Troms*. This is on order to place the analytical emphasis on the production rather than consumption and distribution of discourse discernible in the more interactive aspects of social media posts, with the purpose of highlighting the particularities of *For Finnmark*'s discursive region work. The analysis below outlines and discusses central themes and problem representations regarding centralisation and the political process within these texts, and examines how they are spatialised in different ways through mobilisation of regional history and attempts at rescaling the discourse.

8.2 Contesting the Troms-Finnmark merger

A centralising reform

A core narrative present within the texts published by *For Finnmark* is that the reform as a whole, and the Troms-Finnmark merger specifically, constitute a centralising force, and that centralisation will have negative consequences for the county. Reflecting the county council's own arguments, this narrative directly contests the government's claim, outlined in Chapter 7, that the reform facilitates decentralisation through the reallocation of both power and responsibilities to the regional scale.

The centralisation narrative is expressed in different ways throughout the texts and places emphasis on different aspects of centralisation. Two key dimensions are particularly noticeable: firstly, a concern with the centralising effects of the regional reform in combination with other government reforms, and the domino effect this might have in more peripheral areas facing challenges around depopulation, and secondly, a concern with the potentially exacerbated political marginalisation of Finnmark as a large but sparsely populated geographical area. As becomes apparent in the analysis, these claims are highly connected to and must be understood in relation to the wider context of the regional policy tradition in Norway, tensions between the counties' different functional and democratic roles, as well as the resurgence of contestation along the centre-periphery cleavage in the country. The analysis addresses these dimensions of the centralisation narrative in turn.

Firstly, the narrative around the feared domino effect of centralisation is typically expressed in a general concern with the centralisation of services as a direct consequence of the reform, as is visible in the claim that

> Much of the resistance from Finnmark has been [due to] the fear that Tromsø will attract more resources, more responsibilities and more people. I think the rest of the country's rural areas should also embrace this fear (For Finnmark, 14.12.2018).

Tromsø, the administrative seat and largest city in Troms County with a current population close to 78 000, compared to Finnmark's entire population of 75 863 before the 2020 merger, and largest city of Alta with some 21 000 (Statistics Norway, 2022, 2023a), is hence perceived as a threat to the 'decentralised structures' that Finnmark County Council sought to preserve. The gravitational pull of Tromsø, popularly expressed in references to *'kjøttvekta'* (literally 'meat weight'), a figure of speech referring to the rule of the majority used by one interviewee, captures this position in a nutshell (Interview 9, 04.05.2022). The encouragement directed at other rural areas embracing the fear of centralisation in the context of the merger indicates that, above and beyond resisting a merger with *Troms*, Finnmark's hesitance is fundamentally connected to its geographical and demographic characteristics.

This is interesting seen in light of research on the 2010 regional reform, where Vebostad (2013) observed that while most Norwegian counties engaged in centre-periphery discourse, their identification of what constituted the 'centre' and 'periphery' in question differed based on whether they were for or against mergers. Where pro-merger counties identified Norway as a periphery in a global context, and as such felt they would benefit from larger regions, anti-merger counties such as Finnmark feared becoming a "periphery in the periphery" within a larger region (ibid: 203). The fear of becoming the weaker party within an amalgamated Troms-Finnmark can also be seen in similar entries lamenting "a centralisation of institutions, organisations and decision-making power that does not serve our county and the services offered to the population […]" (For Finnmark, 22.01.2019).

Importantly, however, the centralisation narrative is not limited to a concern with the centralisation of services provided by the counties per se, such as upper secondary education. Rather, a 'domino effect' narrative places this concern within the context of its envisioned wider consequences, as expressed in a 1 May speech by a regional labour union leader recounted on *For Finnmark*'s website:

> This is about our future, the youth. The more centralisation of school provision, the greater the chance of young people moving away. What will this mean for rural areas? *It becomes a vicious circle, because it will add to other things being closed down or centralised* (For Finnmark, 01.05.2019).

Viewing the reform in the wider context of centralisation, including the reorganisation of the regional state, is commonplace in these texts, for instance seen in one author's identification as "among those who have been sceptical about many of the government's reforms" (For Finnmark, 08.05.2018). This can also be observed in the way the merger is discussed in connection with concurrent reforms affecting rural areas:

> The truth is that there is a common thread running from the government's carnivore management and all their administrative upheavals via the dismantling of the Armed Forces to forced mergers: "*To hell with Distrikts-Norge!*" (For Finnmark, 17.01.2019).

This quote is illustrative in the sense that it shows how resistance to the regional reform is being interdiscursively connected to broader centre-periphery, urban-rural – as well as north-south – cleavages, expressed in both the 'rural rebellion' and more specific 'northern rebellion' hotly debated in the media in this period, in the lead-up to the 2019 regional and municipal elections (Chapter 1). This is in many ways a local reflection of long-standing ideological debates on the role of the regional level of government in Norway (Chapter 2), which effect is to elevate ostensibly technocratic or pragmatic debates about delegation and localisation of responsibilities into contested, political questions. This was also the case in discussions around the regions' democratic role, as the following section will show.

Secondly, concerns about the centralising effects of the regional reform were also extended to and expressed in a more specific fear regarding the *political* marginalisation of Finnmark as a large but sparsely populated region. As I will discuss further below, this narrative is closely connected with claims to Finnmark's uniqueness and the construction of a regional 'we' as reasons for the continued need for political representation at and through the regional scale. This concern about political marginalisation has several dimensions which in different ways relate to the institutional shape of the region; its materialisation in concrete legal and political arrangements as well as physical structures nationally, regionally, and within the context of local land and water management. As I will show, this dimension of the centralisation narrative places weight on the political and legal

meaning and effect of regional boundaries and regional space beyond its symbolic shape.

For instance, regarding the potential consequences of the regional reform for parliamentary elections, one entry emphasised that Finnmark was at risk of losing power and representation nationally:

> The Conservative Party's representative for Finnmark claimed from the parliamentary podium that the regional reform would bring us closer to power and where decisions were made. How this could be achieved by centralising power and giving Finnmark less representation both in the parliament and in the new county council for Troms and Finnmark is a mystery (For Finnmark, 08.12.2018).

In *For Finnmark*'s own 1 May speech in 2018, the group stressed the same message, with additional emphasis on *democracy itself* as an institution in danger:

> The foundations of democracy are under threat. The very foundations of the people are under threat. […] *We from Finnmark live at the far end of the country and furthest away from the authorities.* This means that we do not have the same opportunity to influence decision-makers as *those who live in their neighbourhood.* We must therefore protect our democracy with all our might, and ensure that power is strengthened closer to the people (For Finnmark, 01.05.2018).

This overarching political marginalisation narrative must be understood within its particular geo-historical and political context. At different points in time, either cities or more peripheral areas have been overrepresented in the Norwegian parliament, due to changing ways of allocating seats (NOU 2020: 6: 90). Currently, parliamentary seats are allocated on the basis of "a weighted sum of inhabitants and geographical area"; this means that constituencies such as Finnmark, with a large area but small population, are overrepresented on a population basis (Aardal and Bergh, 2022: 1526). This structural imbalance has in fact been criticised by international election observers, since it exceeds the recommended norm (OSCE, 2009). In a recent official report, where the current allocation was up for debate, the majority was in favour of maintaining some mechanisms that compensate for peripheral and sparsely populated areas, recognising that this is especially relevant for Finnmark. However, the majority also wished to change the current way of allocating seats, arguing, for instance, that geographical distance is less of a hinder today compared to in the past, and moreover, that geography is not the only factor influencing one's access to political power (NOU 2020: 6: 90 ff).

Regarding regional political representation, the texts also place emphasis on the consequences of an 'internal' centralisation of political power to Tromsø, in a parallel to their abovementioned focus on the centralisation of services:

> What is [the prime minister] actually offering? Well, the idea that more centralisation of power will lead to more decentralisation. And greater concentration of power in fewer hands will create more local democracy. Understand that if you can. Regardless of assurances about the distribution of influence, it is the *law of nature* that a city like Tromsø, which has as many inhabitants as all of Finnmark combined, will become the seat of power (For Finnmark, 26.05.2018).

Both centralisation narratives (regarding its domino effect on services, and political marginalisation) rely on the representation of Troms County's interests as fundamentally different to, and sometimes in direct opposition to, Finnmark's. These representations, however, as in the likening of political centralisation to a 'law of nature' in the text above, tend to address Tromsø *city* rather than Troms County as a whole. This was also a clear theme among key informants, one of whom stated that "[…] Troms is one thing, Tromsø is another place. If you get what I mean. Because the rest of Troms is just like Finnmark […]" (Interview 1, 11.06.2021). Mentioning, for instance, Finnmark and North Troms' shared experience of evacuation in the aftermath of the Second World War, the interviewee pointed to the similarities between the two counties, while in contrast describing Tromsø as marked by for instance being a 'university city' (also Interview 10, 07.05.2022). This distinction between Troms and Tromsø further extends to portrayals of the population of the city, not only its political elite, as expressed in one entry reciting the 1 May speech of a Finnmark Labour Party politician:

> [… A regional newspaper] published an opinion poll in which *the people of Tromsø* gave the *clear message* that all management *must* go to Tromsø. That says it all (For Finnmark, 02.05.2018).

Other entries, however, make less of a distinction between Troms County and Tromsø city, yet still recognises the effect of having a large city within one's region when concluding that a merger inevitably benefits the 'stronger party':

> For people in Troms and for Troms County Council, however, a merger would appear far less dramatic than for people and elected officials in the neighbouring county. With twice as many inhabitants and with a "county capital" Tromsø,

which alone was about to have a larger population than the whole of Finnmark, no one imagined that Troms or Tromsø's interests would be particularly (negatively) affected by a merger with Finnmark (For Finnmark, 15.05.2018).

The emphasis on Troms County as a whole is also present in a parliamentary committee speech by the deputy county mayor of Finnmark from the Labour Party, recounted by *For Finnmark*:

> The only possible solution we arrived at through negotiations [with Troms] was a solution where all political and administrative decision-making power was transported out of Finnmark. This was *inedible* for Finnmark County Council and this was inedible for *the people of Finnmark*. The story might have ended here, but the people of Finnmark are *too proud to let themselves be marginalised* (For Finnmark, 24.05.2018).

Finally, the specific consequences of the merger with Troms for the management of 95% of Finnmark's land and water (Chapter 6) was specifically highlighted and discussed in depth in a number of entries. This is one case where *For Finnmark* actively contributed to the parliamentary consultation process, as exemplified by a statement posted on its website in full (For Finnmark, 10.03.2019), and showcases the interest group's pursuit of direct region work in formal institutional contexts, illustrating the range of the group's counter-discourse beyond the informal sphere of politics.

In related entries, the Finnmark Act regarding local management of land and water, described as "a series of carefully crafted compromises" (For Finnmark, 17.12.2018) resulting from "a long and painful political process in Finnmark" (For Finnmark, 17.08.2019), is portrayed as a fragile system under threat from the merger:

> The intentions of the Finnmark Act have been violated by a sleight of hand. The people of Finnmark's influence on the management of their own property is significantly weakened (For Finnmark, 20.11.2019).

The threat of a diluted Finnmark Act is also highlighted particularly in terms of Sámi rights and interests, which the Act was established to safeguard:

> If the proposal is implemented, it would be a serious setback for the important political changes made in Norwegian Sámi policy after the Alta case. […] It took about 25 years, hundreds of pages of official reports and countless hours of heated

radio debates, public meetings and party meetings before the Finnmark Act was adopted in 2005 (17.12.2018).

As the entry, written by a local Labour Party politician, goes on to explain, one of the most discussed issues ahead of the implementation of the Act (but also continuing after) was regarding how the board of FeFo is elected (also Eira, 2013; Olsen, 2010, 2011). The politician complains that the merger, which would have implications for the FeFo election process,

> […] is arrogantly referred to as a "technical change". However, this is a significant political and fundamental change to the Finnmark Act (For Finnmark, 17.12.2018).

In line with this, another entry laments that "neither the parliamentary majority nor the government bothered to analyse the consequences for the Finnmark Estate" if the merger was to be implemented (For Finnmark, 19.11.2018). Similar views are reflected in both the Sámi Parliament, FeFo, and Finnmark County's statements in connection to the parliamentary consultation process (Prop. 134 L [2018-2019]: 7-8).

Ultimately, the centralisation discourse reproduced in the above narratives about depopulation, services, and political power must be understood in light of the historical role of the counties as regional units in Norway, as well as the significance of the centre-periphery cleavage in shaping its role in the nineteenth century, expressed in what has been described as a "class compromise between the radical farmers' movement and the established civil service" (Selstad, 2003: 19-20). As Selstad explains, the 'national emancipation' that took place when Norway adopted its own constitution in 1814 (although without the presence of any representatives from North Norway due to the long travel distances and a slow postal service) led to commoners advocating for local and regional self-government. While the cities had an elected, advisory body representing merchants and civil servants, rural areas had no equivalent, at a time when only 11% of the population lived in cities. *Formannskapslovene*, laws eventually adopted in 1837, introduced an elected body (*formannskap*) also in rural areas – though the laws still distinguished between city and country, for instance in terms of the former's trade privileges. The elected bodies of the regional *amter* (now *fylker*/counties) were constituted by the mayors of the local *herreder* (now *kommuner*/municipalities), while the cities were not part of the amt structure (ibid: 36 ff). As such, the laws represented a move from 'top-down' towards a more 'bottom-up' form of local and regional government, where particularly the

regional level of government has continually fluctuated between these two principles of governance (ibid: 25-26).

As such, I argue that *For Finnmark*'s counter-institutionalising region work strongly reflects and mobilises a long-standing value debate in Norwegian politics; crucial in the adoption of *Formannskapslovene* in the nineteenth century, and just as salient (though in a different political context) in discussions about the role of the counties since their political-administrative restructuring in the 1970s, as well as in continuing debates about the regional scale ever since. The democratic value of local autonomy hence comes into conflict with aims of a slimmer and less bureaucratic state structure, a tension that is explicitly addressed in one entry:

> The new majority government [The Conservative Party and the Progress Party, including the Liberal Party since 2018 and the Christian Democratic Party since 2019] states in its declaration that the state is large and bureaucratic and needs to be cut back, while the private sector is innovative, creates value and needs tax advantages. In practice, this means that the public sector must give way to the private sector's solutions. It is based on an ideological mindset that is important to keep in mind: Liberalism. Most people do not understand why it should be necessary to force Finnmark and Troms to become one county. But there is a political idea and a strategy that governs what is now happening. For *us in Distrikts-Norge*, this is a strong warning of difficult times. It is a recipe for centralisation and the risk of losing political power and influence. There is a lot at stake, and both the people and our politicians must realise this (For Finnmark, 28.01.2019).

Thus, while I argue that *For Finnmark*'s counter-discourse is a contemporary manifestation of a long-standing value debate in Norway, this is not to suggest that the group's region work appears to only revolve around regional identity or the region's symbolic shape, though these are also important features in people's reasoning about the reform (Interview 10, 07.05.2022). Rather, as indicated above, it is a value debate that in the case of *For Finnmark* is predominantly about the distribution of political power between different spatial scales, political representation at and through the regional scale, and its material implications for the county's decision-making, provision of public services, and management of the Finnmark Estate.

The merger process

Another core narrative contributing to the counter-discourse of *For Finnmark* is related to critique directed at the political process of the reform itself. In contrast

to the primarily centre-periphery emphasis and regional policy focus of the centralisation narrative, the narrative around the merger process draws heavily on legal language and a 'democracy' discourse. As I will show in the analysis below, the discourse as such has two noteworthy dimensions: it seeks to contest the legitimacy of the government's reform process, and to legitimise regional resistance to said process with claims to representing a 'popular will'.

Firstly, the texts provide several examples of *For Finnmark* disputing or challenging the legitimacy of the merger process. The texts differ in form and purpose, from informing the audience of the ongoing process, providing legal analysis and recommendations for action, and calling for 'civil disobedience' from the county council through refusal to participate in the merger process. Some of these texts extensively reference legal texts and as such perform a different type of counter-discourse compared to the narratives based in a centre-periphery logic. An example of this can be seen in a text outlining a legal argument, initially prepared for a parliamentary consultation, titled *Assessment of the case processing prior to the parliamentary decision of 8 June 2017 on the merger of Troms and Finnmark* (For Finnmark, 18.08.2019). In line with this, in several entries the group informs its audience of the ongoing process of assessing whether there is a legal basis for contesting the merger:

> Legal experts on public administration agree with us that the parliament's decision is not in line with the law. Several legal communities have independently concluded that the decision in the parliament was not sufficiently assessed. Even the Standing Committee on Local Government and Public Administration in the parliament believes that the decision was made on a weak legal basis (For Finnmark, 11.01.2019).

Likewise, Finnmark's chances of succeeding with a legal challenge is further discussed in another entry:

> Finnmark has good opportunities to succeed with a lawsuit. The objections that have been raised against the parliament's decision are of a nature that the courts will not or cannot take lightly. They are violations of very basic and fundamental democratic rights, and it will not take much for a court to conclude that the decision is invalid (For Finnmark, 09.12.2018).

Moreover, the potential legal case is portrayed as having a democratic value beyond the immediate case of Troms and Finnmark:

The central government's handling of this case should be of interest to people regardless of their views on the merger itself. The overarching theme of the case is the question of how central government relates to local government, local democracy (For Finnmark, 08.06.2018).

In signalling *For Finnmark*'s active engagement in these processes, one entry additionally reports from a parliamentary committee meeting in which *For Finnmark*, along with other interest groups and actors, participated:

The Sámi parliament emphasised that they had not been consulted and that they reacted to this. The county mayor […] made it clear that the county council has not given up the fight at all, and that they are still considering legal action if necessary. [A *For Finnmark* representative] put all his professorial and professional weight into demonstrating that the decision on the forced merger of Finnmark and Troms is "illegal", and thus "invalid", referring to the violation of the law's requirements for process and participation (For Finnmark, 07.11.2018).

Beyond acting as an information source reporting on recent developments and providing legal analysis, however, other texts additionally seek to mobilise the audience politically through calls to action:

We encourage everyone who has the opportunity to meet at the county hall in Vadsø […] to promote *the people's demand for legal action* now. For those of you who cannot be in Vadsø, we encourage you to send a Christmas card to our county council representatives to vote in favour of an independent Finnmark or any other greetings you want conveyed to our politicians (For Finnmark, 09.12.2018).

In line with this role as a mobiliser for action, the group also stresses its support of the county council and willingness to contribute financially to legal proceedings (For Finnmark, 11.01.2019). In particular, the group stresses that its members are behind this initiative, which provides them with legitimacy:

It is important for us to emphasise that if there is a future legal case against the state, many have already contacted ForFinnmark and are ready to help collect money. This tells us that *ForFinnmark is a channel where people from Finnmark can voice their opinions, and that is our "mandate"* (For Finnmark, 05.10.2018).

As with the centralisation discourse discussed above, these examples point to the range of direct region work *For Finnmark* has engaged in, enabled by its heterogeneous and multi-voiced discourse, and ability to position itself halfway between formal and more informal political arenas through participation in

parliamentary consultations as well as through grassroots mobilisation along with media influence, which tends to characterise this type of public interest group (Binderkrantz, 2008).

Secondly, *For Finnmark*'s critique of the legitimacy of the merger process in these texts, and justification for contesting it, is contingent on a claim to represent 'the people' and the 'popular will', which the text cited above gives an indication of. This claim is made throughout the texts, commonly with reference to the 2018 referendum results. One entry in particular, written in response to what the group describes as attempts to "discredit and marginalise the organised opposition" to the reform in the media, highlights this:

> [A Conservative Party politician] appears to be a sore loser, in a situation where ForFinnmark is *at the helm of a popular rebellion* against the right-wing government's forced merger. A rebellion that is in the process of *gaining ground nationally*. A rebellion that is *supported by the people, not a few people in ForFinnmark*. The fight for reversal has spread to Viken – and now also to Vestlandet! Another achievement by the stubborn people here in the north – incidentally from the same two counties that were the decisive factor in the people's NO [to joining the EU] in 94. The fight against the forced merger would NEVER have gained such strength without the *referendum* and the *popular mobilisation* in Finnmark. The *broad, politically non-aligned popular organisation ForFinnmark* has shown the whole country how it should be done! (For Finnmark, 08.10.2019).

In the texts, *For Finnmark* construes a regional 'we' for which the group acts as a spokesperson – and consequently 'others', both internal to the region ('here') and external to it ('there') (cf. Paasi, 1996: 14). The 'other', that is, those who are not part of the in-group *For Finnmark* claims to represent, is defined at different spatial scales, ranging from the local to the national. Most locally are the 'dissenters' within Finnmark itself. While the county council majority actively resisted the merger, other members – especially associated with the nationally governing parties – were supportive of a Troms-Finnmark merger, and hence portrayed as in direct opposition to the 'popular rebellion' spearheaded by *For Finnmark*, as in the text cited above. Local media and politicians based in Alta, the largest city in Finnmark, are sometimes also portrayed as constituting a counter-movement to *For Finnmark*'s work against the merger (Interview 6, 12.04.2022).

However, at other stages of the process, critique was also directed by *For Finnmark* at the council majority, in particular (factions within) Finnmark Labour Party, which was accused of turning their backs on their constituents when they

eventually partook in the joint committee to implement the merger (For Finnmark, 27.05.2019). The party is accused of no longer respecting the result of the referendum, as lacking credibility, and of having carried out an internal 'coup' in the eyes of "ForFinnmark and […] the more than 30 000 people of Finnmark who voted no to a merger […]" (For Finnmark, 14.02.2019).

This critique of the Labour Party, perhaps more so than representations of the group's 'natural' political opponents, can tell us something about the particular context of *For Finnmark*'s region work. It indicates that *For Finnmark* was able to take a less constrained position than formal political actors such as the political party, at times adopting a more overtly populist type of rhetoric within the same overarching counter-discourse, which enables the narrative that only the group represents the *true* interests of Finnmark while the Labour Party has betrayed its constituents. One way that the group legitimises this role is through the claim that *For Finnmark* has more members than the Labour Party regionally (For Finnmark, 12.12.2018). At the broader regional and national scale, the opposition – including Tromsø and the central authorities – is defined in the more traditional centre-periphery perspective recognisable in the centralisation narrative outlined in the previous section. This is also reflected in how the group has mobilised regional history in its region work, which the following section addresses.

Mobilising regional history and identity

In the above narratives, arguments often rely on a mobilisation of regional history to highlight Finnmark's unique position, giving further indication of who is considered to constitute a regional 'we'. As I will show, *For Finnmark*'s explicit mobilisation of regional history can be observed in three distinct ways: as an argument for why Finnmark should remain a separate county, in describing the process of the merger as 'top-down', undemocratic, and heavily enforced, and finally, as an indirect influence on the character of the group's reform discourse. As discussed in the next section, however, the problematisation of the reform as a whole and the merger between Troms and Finnmark in particular is also discursively rescaled in various ways, especially in relation to ideologies associated with the political left-right axis, regional policy, and centre-periphery cleavages.

The first example of *For Finnmark*'s mobilisation of regional history relates to the group's arguments for why Finnmark should have remained a region in itself, and

why the merged region later should be dissolved. This argument is based on emphasising Finnmark's uniqueness in several respects, as in the following text:

> The opposition in Finnmark is *not a general opposition to the regional reform* [...]. The opposition is directed specifically against the forced merger of Troms and Finnmark. It is based on a number of concrete arguments against the content and process of the decision, *Finnmark's special characteristics in geography, history, culture, business and people, and Finnmark's special need for its own political platform* (For Finnmark, 17.07.2018).

Some of these perceived 'special characteristics' are outlined in other texts:

> The thing is that *Finnmark is not like other counties.* We are few in number, but of *great importance: Richest in resources such as fish, minerals, oil and gas,* and bordering Russia and Finland. Important in terms of indigenous rights and international agreements, and a particularly important intelligence area for NATO (For Finnmark, 16.12.2018).

In this line of argument, it is these unique conditions, in combination with Finnmark's history (Chapter 6), that justifies the continued need for the county maintaining its own political platform – reflecting the broader value debate about the role of the county councils referred to above:

> And this is precisely the crux of the struggle: The people of Finnmark know what it means to be *ruled from the outside* and to be treated as *second-class colonial citizens*, because someone "down there in the civilisation" knows better than them. If you know a little about Finnmark's history, this is a common thread that runs through the relationship between the authorities and the population; from the *treatment of the Sámi and the Kvens* to a fisheries policy that has often *benefited southern shipowners* more than those living in the small fishing villages (For Finnmark, 26.05.2018).

As the examples above show, *For Finnmark*'s claims to regional uniqueness are based on two partly contradictory narratives about outside exploitation. One draws on what can be identified as a so-called "bourgeois" regionalism associated with claims to being a rich and important region made to subsidise other regions, while the other narrative more closely reflects forms of "anti-austerity populism" based on being a poor region that gets unfairly exploited by elite actors (Newth, 2024: 19). While these narratives mobilise different spatial imaginaries and articulate different discourses on space, they nonetheless both contribute to an

overarching "discourse of betrayal" (ibid) where the region is portrayed as disadvantaged by outside political and economic interests.

The second way in which regional history is typically mobilised by *For Finnmark* in these texts relate to descriptions of and attempts at portraying the merger process itself as an undemocratic exercise of power from the central authorities, and in relation, as a way of legitimising the group's resistance to it, including the initial resistance of the county council to partake in the merger process. In this regard, one text warns that

> If the parliament still wants to use force against Finnmark and pass a coercive law, it will create irreparable wounds. If there is one thing Finnmark has had more than enough of, it is injustice, arrogance and coercive laws. This is ingrained in large parts of the population (For Finnmark, 03.10.2018).

Likewise, another text draws on the region's historical experience with southern domination to emphasise the continuity of what is perceived as political coercion:

> It is no coincidence that the use of coercion takes place in the far north of the country – towards the border with Russia. Where, historically, they are not entirely unfamiliar with the dictates of the central authorities, Norwegianisation policy, and South Norwegian arrogance (For Finnmark, 30.06.2018).

Some texts go as far as drawing on comparisons to the occupation of Norway in the Second World War to stress how they perceive the government's conduct in this case, as in the statement of a Centre Party politician:

> I am sure that there are a lot of people who think like me when I compared the coercion today to the German government takeover in 1940-45 (For Finnmark, 28.11.2018).

The history of the region's indigenous people – in particular, the Alta Conflict (Chapter 6) – is also explicitly used to justify the 'civil disobedience' of the county council in initially refusing to partake in the joint committee for implementing the merger:

> The development of the Alta/Kautokeino watercourse is an obvious example. There is indeed a dam in Sautso [North Sámi: Čávžu], but if no one had opposed the central authorities, the whole of Masi [North Sámi: *Máze*] would be under water (For Finnmark, 29.04.2018).

Statements like those cited above must be understood in light of Finnmark's particular history and the issue of trust – and mistrust – in central authorities. This emerged as an important theme in several interviews. One interview participant, for example, when elaborating on their point of view regarding not just the recent regional reform but also other, structural changes to the political and institutional landscape in Norway, explained that

> If you look a bit back on my story, it's coloured by, really this kind of culture of suspicion towards the authorities, because in Finnmark we've never had much faith in the authorities, we've kind of had an inherent feeling that someone's come to take something that we […] own (Interview 2, 15.06.2021).

Another interview participant more forcefully expressed anger at the attitude of national politicians towards Finnmark, and explained people from Finnmark's feelings towards the central authorities in this regard from a historical standpoint, remarking that

> Their names could be both Erna and Kåre [former Conservative Party prime ministers] and whatever the fuck their names are; they have an attitude towards Finnmark which is inherited in their genes. So we have an inherent distaste for domination (Interview 1, 11.06.2021).

A final quote illustrates a similar, but more muted attitude, connected to an interview participant's self-identification as someone who silently protests without "raising a fist physically, or shouting out loud and swearing":

> My mother had a saying, "it doesn't matter, we're used to being tormented", or "I'm used to being tormented". And there might actually be something to that. Oh well, we'll be fine. […] We're used to butting heads after all (Interview 4, 18.06.2021).

The three quotes above are all attributed to a regional 'we' and enact a particular kind of regional identity connected to a juxtaposition with and resistance against a southern, central, and national 'they' which variably 'torment', 'dominate', and 'steal'. The quotes express a strong sense of mistrust and grievance in the narrative they produce about national centre-periphery and north-south relations, consistent with some of the protest movements that have emerged from North Norway in recent years (Chapter 9). While these are statements by key informants who were approached for the specific reason that they in one way or another are involved in regional activism, and thus cannot speak for a wider regional

perception, they do give an indication of the political and cultural discursive context that *For Finnmark*'s narrative about the merger is able to interdiscursively tap into, also supported by surveys reporting regional differences in political trust (Stein et al., 2021a).

Finally, it is also possible to observe more indirect ways in which *For Finnmark*'s counter-institutionalising region work is spatialised, such as in the group's use of locally significant expressions. Use of such expressions and dialect can be seen as acts of signalling one's identity situated within a regional community (Nesse, 2008). One example of this is the phrase '*vi står han av*', a northern saying which refers to a collective 'we' surviving or mastering a tough situation, originally harsh weather conditions (ibid). In the texts, the expression is used both in reference to Finnmark's uniqueness and mentality (For Finnmark, 28.02.2021), but also in reference to *For Finnmark*'s resilience in the face of the reform process and current media discourse (For Finnmark, 08.10.2019). One interviewee's metadiscursive reflections about this phrase as being one of many "simple expressions that testify to a kind of patriotism and sense of identity" rooted in Finnmark's particular history, gives a sense of the meaning being communicated through the term (Interview 10, 07.05.2022).

Repeated use of the phrase '*herre i eget hus*' has a similar spatialising effect. Roughly having the same meaning as the expression to 'be one's own master' (or literally, 'master of one's own house'), the phrase is used by *For Finnmark* about the reform as a whole (For Finnmark, 13.05.2019), but also specifically about its implications for the Finnmark Act (For Finnmark, 17.12.2018). While not a northern saying, it has a significant intertextual function, since the phrase was commonly used to describe the perceived consequences of the Finnmark Act around the time of its implementation (Eira, 2013). It is also used as a way of signalling the stakes at risk in the regional reform, reflected in a the title of a book published by Finnmark County (Hamran, 2020). Being one's own master is, in this sense, a status that has been politically won in Finnmark, but which can also be dispossessed.

As with the interviewee's reflections on the phrase '*vi står han av*', there are other examples in the texts of metadiscourse – wherein speakers "provide supplementary indications about the intentionality, implications, and goals of their own discourse" (Ilie, 2015: 12). This concerned the general terms of the public debate, which in many cases took less than civil turns, also involving accusations against *For Finnmark*, as media reports at the time attested (e.g., Hamran, 2020: 209-211). While there might be a degree of perceived authenticity associated with dialect use (Sollid, 2008), as well as pride associated with the stereotype of the

robust, straight-talking northerner (Nesse, 2008; also Interview 5, 24.06.2021), too much of it can, as one entry warns, damage the legitimacy of *For Finnmark* and its overall cause:

> In a world where our opponents use all means to quell the anger of the people of Finnmark, it is actually the case that when we use swear words, insults and extreme expressions *that we are used to here at home*, those who are against us react with a shrug, and perhaps think that we are fools, that we are nothing to worry about, and that the crowd there claims that they should be able to be *herre i eget hus!* (For Finnmark, 24.06.2018).

The text, directed at *For Finnmark*'s supporters, calls for restraint on social media, since outsiders might not fully 'get' the forceful expressions they use. This was also reflected in one interview, where the informant discussed the difficulties of controlling one's own ranks and moderating an online debate characterised by expressions resulting from feelings of disenfranchisement among people (Interview 6, 12.04.2022). As such, while *For Finnmark*'s counter-discourse is clearly spatialised through both direct and indirect mobilisation of regional history and identity, there is also a deliberate attempt to 'temper' it in order to make it more palatable for southerners and in more formal contexts; to appear outwards as someone who is capable of being 'one's own master'. Yet from a perspective of strategic essentialism, the group's use of local expressions and dialect, even in a restrained way, can be understood as a way of reproducing the region in a specific image, projecting its history and identity through choices about language use (cf. Sollid, 2008). *For Finnmark*'s use of local expressions can as such be further compared with another organisation, *Kystopprøret*'s, way of engaging in indirect region work, addressed in Chapter 9.

Interdiscursive scale framing

As I have indicated throughout the analysis, while *For Finnmark*'s counter-discourse appears heavily regionalised – dependent on the portrayal of a regional 'we' in opposition to internal and external 'others', from regional dissenters to the central authorities – much of the narrative constructs a broader spatial frame in which the reform is discussed in light of processes at the national and even global scale. In particular, the group's spatial problematisation of the reform in terms of a more general value debate about the function and role of the counties in local governance explicitly places the merger in relation to aforementioned political

debates, as such challenging the new regionalism discourse central to the reform (Chapter 7, cf. Selstad, 2003: 18).

Firstly, this can be observed in frequent comparisons with merger processes in other counties in Norway, as well as the parallel municipal reform which also involved mergers. Finnmark is portrayed as a role model for resistance, wherein resistance to the reform is described as a common project uniting the people of different counties across the country against the government's reform. Describing the reform as a "crude centralisation project" indicates that it is specifically less central, smaller places that fear mergers, showing the centre-periphery dimension of opposition to the reform:

> There is a *fierce power struggle* going on in Norway today. It is most evident in the far north because the people there are tough as nails and dare to stand up to *the authorities' crude centralisation project*. Many other parts of the country have been *similarly marginalised*. [Even] if they have been cowed so far, there is great sympathy both there and elsewhere for the people of Finnmark (For Finnmark, 24.06.2018).

This is also visible in the claim that the reform constitutes a form of city-region thinking that favours the bigger cities in Norway over the smaller (For Finnmark, 14.12.2018). Contesting the idea that the opposition to the reform only revolves around localisation issues and a power struggle between Vadsø and Tromsø, seats of the county administrations prior to 2020, as one interviewee also stresses (Interview 6, 12.04.2022), the narrative is explicitly connected to positions on the political spectrum, and as such, to broader political questions:

> Opposition to the forced merger of counties is growing across the country. In the south, people look to Finnmark with respect for the way the people of Finnmark have organised their resistance and for the courage to keep up the fight until the general election and a red-green [centre-left] majority in 2021 (For Finnmark, 13.05.2019).

Secondly, there are also entries where the group looks to other countries, either to legitimise a regional movement based on identity through comparison to regionalist movements elsewhere, such as the case of Catalonia (For Finnmark, 12.11.2019), or to support the legal arguments for overturning the merger based on similar political processes in for instance France, arguing that "this case is not only about the merger of Finnmark and Troms counties but also about *local government as such*" (For Finnmark, 08.06.2018).

Finally, *For Finnmark*'s social and spatial framing can also be observed in expressions of solidarity with other interest groups and causes, and interdiscursive adoption of these themes within their own discursive region work. For example, the centre-periphery dimension of the reform comes to show in references to for instance the Norwegian EC/EU debate, where, as discussed in Chapter 6, North Norway has been the region most clearly against membership in both 1972 and 1994 (Bjørklund, 1997; Rudlang, 1996):

> We stand together, and *we will show the right wing* that the people in Finnmark and Troms are still going strong – *as they were in 94*! (For Finnmark, 07.11.2018).

The clearest expression of affinity with another movement, however, can be found in references to activist organisations in the fisheries sector, discussed in more detail in Chapter 9. For example, this is visible in the way in which the group establishes a connection between Finnmark's coastal and fjord population's "unique and crucial competence for the fisheries" and the risk that this expertise will not be heard due to distance-based barriers to participation in Troms and Finnmark County Council (For Finnmark, 04.11.2018). This affinity is also highlighted in connection to questions around the ownership of natural resources in the region:

> Finnmark harbours enormous wealth and always has. [...] Today we still have great wealth in fisheries, aquaculture, oil, gas and minerals, but we do not own the companies and we do not get to partake in the large profits. When the money has reached the owners in the south and the state treasury, it is renamed subsidies and state transfers and sent northwards to poor Finnmark-municipalities (For Finnmark, 13.08.2018).

Meanwhile, those in favour of the reform, such as a regional newspaper branding itself as representing 'the little guy', is described as "an instrument of right-wing forces, [fish] quota barons and fish farming billionaires" (For Finnmark, 30.09.2019). Shared interests with the fisheries sector also give grounds for the group to question the government's notions of robustness, competence, and value creation underlying the reform, asking how it is measured and what it excludes (For Finnmark, 10.02.2019). One entry, written as a fictional letter addressed to the prime minister, as such claims that

> Erna, we are already robust. We have the competence to live where we live. It might be that you wouldn't have made it as a fisher in an open boat on the fjord

where I live. Then it would be you that lacked competence, wouldn't it? (For Finnmark, 08.08.2019).

Similarly, another entry, in comparing the urban and the rural in terms of value creation in Norway, argues that

> I am constantly amazed that it has not dawned on well-informed urban stakeholders in Oslo that much of the origin and basis of value creation throughout the country is that people live along the coastlines of Norway. Where natural resources such as fish, oil, gas and minerals are found. [...] Not a single raw material is harvested in and around the think tanks in Oslo, or at the head offices of the big companies (For Finnmark, 30.06.2018).

In effect, *For Finnmark*'s opposition to the reform is interdiscursively elevated to co-opt and engage in broader value debates between previously discussed binaries: between centre and periphery, 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' governance, left and right-wing politics, and so on. This is not unique to *For Finnmark* (Chapter 9); from one interviewee's perspective, recent protest movements that are popularly labelled "rural rebellions" (*distriktsopprør*) could perhaps better be described as examples of a "value reckoning" (*verdioppgjør*) that currently cuts across both urban and rural interests, from Oslo in the south to Berlevåg in the north (Interview 2, 15.06.2021). This section has therefore illustrated how *For Finnmark*'s discursive region work draws on and aligns with a range of broader societal discourses, consequently framing their opposition at multiple spatial scales simultaneously. The following chapter addresses the opposite side of this coin: how the region work of interest groups related to fisheries policy and hospital localisation in Finnmark have become intertwined with the contested politics of regionalisation. First, however, the concluding section will discuss key takeaways of the analysis in this chapter for the understanding of regional counter-institutionalisation processes.

8.3 Multi-voiced region work

This chapter has explored examples of local resistance to the 2020 merger of Troms and Finnmark counties in order to address how state-led regionalisation discourses are contested locally in Norway. The chapter has specifically placed emphasis on the public interest group *For Finnmark*'s region work in relation to the merger by analysing how its narratives about the centralising consequences of

the reform, as well as the political process around it, have been shaped by the group's mobilisation of regional history and identity along with more overarching societal discourses pertaining to other spatial scales. As an interest group which leadership mainly consists of former and current politicians, yet which has successfully mobilised popular support for its cause, *For Finnmark* provides an informative example which sheds light on an organisational actor's region work across different institutional and socio-spatial contexts.

Firstly, the analysis has pointed to the range of counter-institutionalising direct region work performed by *For Finnmark* in different socio-spatial contexts; attempts to denaturalise or deconstruct a dominant regionalisation discourse through the mobilisation of regional history and identity, along with more overarching societal discourses. The majority of the discussed examples tend to reproduce spatial discourses about Finnmark, North Norway, and peripherality similar to those of the 1970s counter-hegemonic movement (cf. Paulgaard, 2008) (Chapter 6), and are therefore relatively backward-looking in nature. In contrast, there are fewer examples of the group itself producing new regional imaginaries, although *For Finnmark*'s decision to rebrand their public Facebook group into a forward-looking debate forum aimed to, among other things, "ensure people's right to influence and set the agenda" in the county council, and "contribute to rallying the population behind societally beneficial and society-building projects" (For Finnmark, n.d. b) can be interpreted in this direction.

Following from this, one takeaway from the analysis concerns *For Finnmark*'s use of formal and informal discursive strategies in its direct region work in different socio-spatial contexts. The group has for instance sought influence through parliamentary channels, grassroots mobilisation, and though not explored in this thesis, the media. Their direct region work has consequently taken a multi-voiced character, for instance drawing on both legal language and identity discourse. Many of the text excerpts discussed in the analysis above, for instance, aim to mobilise local support and delegitimise political opponents, be they at the regional or national scale, by drawing on historical and recent examples of outside domination which may resonate with many people's material, cultural, and political experience (Chapter 6). In positioning itself as a popular rebellion and a spokesperson for Finnmark's population, the group has been able to assume a polemical stance that contrasts the interests of the region's elected political elite, including Finnmark Labour Party, with the 'will of the people' as expressed in the 2018 consultative referendum.

The group's metadiscursive reflections on language use give additional insights into the breadth of *For Finnmark*'s region work. While the group was able to mobilise support for its cause, it did face the challenge of moderating expressions of discontent among its supporters which could weaken its perceived legitimacy. Among political opponents, the group itself was accused of contributing to a deeply polarised debate climate. Calls for moderation and the expressed desire to be viewed as capable of being '*herre i eget hus*' can therefore be approached with actors' differentiated access to, and ability to set the rules of engagement for, different communicative events in mind (van Dijk, 2003; also Binderkrantz, 2008). The same actors may perform region work in a variety of ways, mobilising different discourses and modes of expression related to the different discursive and material contexts, strategies, and audiences their region work is performed in relation to.

Secondly, elements of *For Finnmark*'s counter-institutionalising region work should also be understood as being of a more indirect nature. This can be observed in the discursive resources the group has mobilised, from their specific language use, including use of locally significant expressions, to what can be seen as 'essentialistic' narratives about regional history, authenticity, and outside domination. This has the spatialising effect of enacting the region in a particular way and defining a regional 'we'. As a result, internal divisions in Finnmark become less evident within this discourse; the central authorities become the unequivocal source of domination, leaving relations between minority and majority populations of Finnmark, West and East, and coastal and inland areas unarticulated in favour of a cohesive regional image (Chapters 6 and 9).

As already addressed in this chapter, however, there are reasons to be cautious about interpreting identity mobilisation in regionalist discourse as an isolated 'factor' in separation from other stakes of political struggle. Previous research on local resistance to the amalgamation of municipalities in a Nordic context has gone some way in highlighting this. Most explicitly, Frisvoll (2016: 248) emphasises the centrality of regional identity in a municipal merger, showing that "the processes have had consequences for who has ownership of the community's resources and *who constitutes the community*" (emphasis added). Others have identified regional identity as "a trigger for acts of resistance against integration processes that are regarded as having been imposed in a top-down manner", but not necessarily the main reason for regional activism in itself (Zimmerbauer et al., 2012: 1073). Rather, regional identity can be understood as a discursive resource which may be mobilised by different actors both in favour of and against regional

mergers. Ultimately, as the analysis of *For Finnmark*'s region work also suggests, such identity discourses are deeply related to, not articulated in separation from, a range of "social practices, values and ideals, such as self-governance/autonomy, rurality, independent service production, or concentration/decentralization" (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013: 32). In adopting this perspective, however, I am not arguing for a purely instrumental view of regional identity; rather, I suggest that the articulation of a regional 'we' always involves material, political, and institutional stakes, and struggles over these. A final takeaway from this chapter, therefore, before turning to the analysis of region work *beyond* struggles over the political-administrative county, is the potential importance of various material, political, and institutional stakes in understanding resistance to regional mergers and why some regionalisation discourses become heavily contested.

9 Region work beyond the county

The two previous chapters have analysed the Solberg Government and the public interest group *For Finnmark*'s discursive region work in connection to the contested regional merger between Troms and Finnmark counties. As the chapters have argued, these actors' direct region work performed a range of discourses on space. On the most general level, this involved discourses associated with 'new' and 'old' regions and their contradictions, which, to reiterate, broadly refer to ad-hoc political projects and historically embedded regions respectively (Chapter 2). The analysis has also highlighted, however, how these actors have engaged in indirect forms of region work, such as through the intersection of national High North policy with government reform objectives, or the more subtle ways in which regional history and identity is expressed and mobilised by regional elites in their counter-discourse.

To move beyond the region in political-administrative terms, however, the analysis in this chapter turns to two additional interest groups based in Finnmark: *Pasientfokus* ('Patient Focus') and *Kystopprøret* ('the Coastal Rebellion'). The former group (represented in parliament with one mandate since 2021) is engaged in political activity regarding Finnmark's hospital structure and timely access to health care in the Alta region, while the latter group's activism is concerned with current fisheries policy and its negative impacts on coastal communities. The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways in which these groups engage in their own forms of discursive region work. Specifically, the chapter addresses the question of how regionalisation discourses performed by state and local actors interact with region work beyond the administrative and political shape of regions in Norway. The two groups' different characteristics, related to for instance the scale at which they frame the political issues they address, and how their narratives are caught up in broader centre-periphery and reform discourse, provide the backdrop for analysing region work beyond explicit political struggles over regional government institutions (Chapters 7 and 8).

The chapter is structured in the following way. The first section introduces the interest group *Pasientfokus*, outlining how its narrative around access to health

care has revolved around Finnmark's geographical features, as well as the presence of intraregional conflict, contesting the notion of a self-evident 'common interest' within Finnmark. Following this, the next section turns to *Kystopprøret* and examines how this group's narrative about the 'robbery of the coast' and its societal consequences is framed in terms of a broader *landsdel* and national scale. These analyses are primarily based on the groups' own blog entries, along with key informant interviews, archival material, and additional documentary sources, outlined in each respective section. Against this backdrop, the chapter's final section explores how both organisations' indirect discursive region work, while not primarily engaged with the regional reform and Troms-Finnmark merger itself, nonetheless has become intertwined with an ongoing transformation of regional structures. In examining *Kystopprøret* and *Pasientfokus*' interdiscursive mobilisation of broader centre-periphery discourse, I show how their counter-institutionalising region work differs based on the scale frames they primarily draw on. I conclude the chapter by emphasising that actors' discursive region work does not constitute neutral spatial representations, but rather the (re)production of value-laden regional imaginaries contingent on broader socio-spatial resonance and uneven access to discursive resources and communicative events.

9.1 A fragmented Finnmark?

Pasientfokus is an Alta-based public interest group and single-issue electoral list whose main objective is advocating for a local hospital to Alta, Finnmark's most populous city with more than 21 000 inhabitants. The group won a seat in parliament for the 2021–2025 period, receiving 12.7% of the vote in Finnmark (0.2% nationally), which made it the third biggest party in the region after the Labour Party (31.4%) and the Centre Party (18.4%). In Alta and Kautokeino municipalities in West Finnmark, *Pasientfokus* was the single biggest election winner, receiving 40.5% and 28.6% of the vote respectively (Valgdirektoratet, 2021).

Despite its electoral success, the group registered as an electoral list only shortly before the 2021 election, emerging from what initially started as a so-called post card campaign in 2017. The aim of this campaign, in which a small group of activists delivered around 15 000 post cards detailing the experiences of hospital patients to the parliament by hand, was to highlight the necessity for a hospital in Alta, which currently is serviced by a local clinic as well as Hammerfest Hospital

140 kilometres to the north (Johannesborg and Bjørge, 2022). *Pasientfokus* also runs *Stiftelsen Alta sykehus* ('Alta Hospital Foundation'), established in 2020, which purpose is to "work for financial support with donations for the possible construction/establishment of a maternity ward with emergency functions and/or geriatrics for the municipalities of Alta, Kautokeino and the districts in the Alta region", given what it views as the state's failure to do so (Pasientfokus, n.d.). *Pasientfokus* has, in other words, operated as a public interest group since 2017, before entering the national political arena with a parliamentary mandate in 2021.

To begin to examine the interest group's region work, it is necessary to briefly outline the regional context of its political objectives. Currently, Finnmark has two hospitals, located in Kirkenes in the east and Hammerfest in the west [North Sámi: *Hámmerfeasta*, Kven: *Hammerfästi*]. In addition, the University Hospital of North Norway, located in Tromsø, acts as a university hospital for the whole *landsdel* (Figure 9.1). Alta is serviced by a local clinic with for instance a delivery room, but not a full maternity ward, meaning that some but not all births in the municipality can take place at the clinic. At the core of *Pasientfokus*' argument for a full-fledged local hospital is the claim that Alta, together with Kautokeino Municipality to the south, constitutes a bigger patient base for a local hospital than Hammerfest. In 2022, the number of births in Alta Municipality was more than twice as high as in Hammerfest Municipality, for example, and more than three times as high as in Sør-Varanger, the municipality housing Kirkenes Hospital (Statistics Norway, 2023b). *Pasientfokus* therefore contends that the two-hour car journey from Alta to Hammerfest is an unacceptable burden for its residents. Moreover, as one interviewee has emphasised with regards to distances to the hospital in other parts of Finnmark, "[…] southerners, excuse the expression, they very often look at the geography from a summer perspective […]" (Interview 1, 11.06.2021). Many roads in the region are weather exposed; this includes the road from Alta to Hammerfest which goes through a mountain pass, Sennalandet, prone to temporary closures and organised convoy driving during heavy snowfall in winter (Statens vegvesen, 2020). This was coincidentally the same stretch of road that made it necessary to re-route my own field trip in April 2022 due to poor weather conditions.

Pasientfokus has not been the only actor engaged in Alta's campaign for a local hospital. Among the established political parties, the Alta branch of the Labour Party, in deliberate opposition to the Labour Party regionally and nationally, has engaged in what the media describes as a "relentless report war" between Alta Municipality and the minister of health and care services at the time over the

factual basis on which to locate a hospital (such as how to calculate travel time, costs, and societal value) (e.g., Furunes, 2017). Moreover, while the emergence of *Pasientfokus* as a single-issue electoral list in Alta, and its success in gaining representation in the parliament in the 2021 election, is novel in its scope, it is not the first list of its kind. As recently as in the 2013 parliamentary election, the electoral list *Sykehus til Alta* ('Hospital to Alta') constitutes another example of grassroots mobilisation around the demand for a hospital. In the end, however, this list only secured 3.9% of the vote in Alta (1.2% in Finnmark overall) (Valgdirektoratet, 2013).
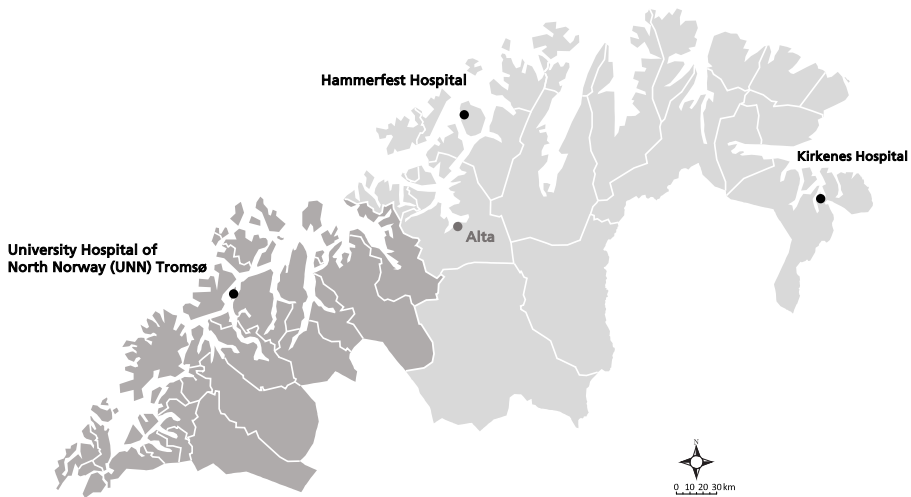
Figure 9.1 Hospitals in Finnmark (and the University Hospital of North Norway)
Base map: Kartverket (CC BY-SA 3.0 NO).

The divisive struggle between Hammerfest and Alta in West Finnmark regarding the location of a local hospital has an even longer history, however, existing since the 1960s but resurfacing in the wake of the decision to build a new hospital in Hammerfest to be finalised by 2025 (Furunes, 2017). The placement of the new hospital in Hammerfest has been motivated by for instance the preservation of already existing professional environments as well as more precarious first-responder medical services on the coast; meanwhile, the opening of a potential third hospital in Alta is seen as neither economically nor professionally viable due to the region's small population base and recruitment challenges (Helse Nord, 2017; Innst. 55 S [2017–2018]).

In protest, *Pasientfokus* laid down the symbolic foundation stone for a future hospital in Alta in 2020 – a stone tablet chained to the monument of a slate worker (Figure 9.2) – on the same day as the minister of health and care services laid down the foundation stone for the new hospital in Hammerfest (Pasientfokus, 2020). By physically placing the demand for a hospital centrally in Alta, the group sought to symbolically express the restricting impact of illness on the "working people of Alta, Kautokeino and its surrounding rural areas [*distriktene*]" (Pasientfokus, 2021a).

Figure 9.2 "Alta hospital with Pasientfokus 08.06.2020"
Skiferarbeideren ved Vossesaksa, monument in Alta by Jon Torgersen. Photographed by the author in April 2022.

Beyond Alta's enduring campaign for its own hospital, however, the placement and operation of local hospitals have also been contentious issues in Finnmark more broadly. A prime example of this is the public interest group *Aksjon sykehus* ('Campaign Hospital'), founded in the late 1990s to preserve Kirkenes Hospital in East Finnmark as a full-fledged hospital on equal terms as Hammerfest Hospital in West Finnmark at a time when this structure was under threat. Its logo, a play on Finnmark County's coat of arms, seems to express a desired balance between east and west within the region (Figure 9.3).

Figure 9.3 "*Aksjon sykehus* – defend our hospital!"
Source: Aksjon sykehus (n.d.).

Aksjon sykehus' arguments in favour of maintaining Kirkenes Hospital in the late 1990s constituted a discourse which, as the analysis below will show, have similarities to *Pasientfokus*' current hospital localisation discourse. Its central narrative concerned the region's geographical and climatic challenges, for instance seen in a statement from a 'people's meeting' in Vardø, an almost 250 kilometres drive north of Kirkenes, in the late 1990s:

> It must be reasonable to demand that the provision of health care services is adapted to the geographical and climatic conditions in Finnmark. Then it is no use to apply the same model of emergency medical preparedness in Finnmark as in Østfold [county in south-eastern Norway] (Folkemøte i Vardø, n.d.).

In a similar vein, a 'counter-white paper' (*motmelding*) authored by a group of medical doctors at the time argued that

> Due to distances, unstable weather conditions and darkness, the air ambulance cannot compensate for closed local hospitals. The hospital plan for North Norway will […] with certainty cause a significantly reduced quality in the provision of care to serious emergency patients in areas around the proposed 'special hospitals' (Motmelding, 1997: 4).

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The paper concluded with an alternative to the proposed plan, arguing that ultimately,

> *Norway's geography, settlement patterns and patient's needs* must be the starting point for how healthcare services are organised. Society should have a duty to secure emergency care within reasonable distance of where people actually live (ibid: 9, emphasis added here and throughout the chapter).

The struggle for two hospitals of equal status (*to likeverdige sykehus*) in Finnmark by *Aksjon Sykehus* has later re-emerged both in 2002 (Henriksen, 2002) and 2023 (Sætra and Klo, 2023); in the latest iteration a battle for around-the-clock intensive care preparedness, indicating that the issue is far from settled. A 2023 petition by medical professionals moreover signals that several other local hospitals in North Norway are similarly threatened by recruitment challenges, and increasing specialisation and centralisation (Bleidvin, 2023). This places *Pasientfokus*' call for establishing a full-fledged hospital with emergency capacity in Alta and thus establishing three hospitals of equal status in Finnmark, as outlined in its 2021–2025 parliamentary work plan, in a broader political perspective (Pasientfokus, 2021b).

The following analysis is primarily based on blog entries posted on *Pasientfokus*' official website, pasientfokus.no. While the group's entry onto the national political stage in 2021 is significant, it is primarily its communication to a broader audience via blog entries that is of interest in this analysis, rather than for instance parliamentary speeches directed at a more specific community of decision-makers. This material is made up of 46 entries dated between July 2021 and July 2022, covering the lead-up to the September 2021 parliamentary election and *Pasientfokus*' first ten months in the parliament. In the period before the election, blog entries were often aimed at mobilising potential voters; in the aftermath, the blog has functioned as a channel where *Pasientfokus* informs its constituents about debates taking place in the parliament. The latter is significant in light of the group's claim to operate through a form of direct democracy, as such distinguishing itself from other political parties (Ojala, 2022). These entries also give an idea of the group's engagement in political questions beyond its main cause, a hospital to Alta. While the group is also active on a Facebook page by the same name, entries from this page are not systematically included in order to more narrowly address *Pasientfokus*' discursive production rather than interaction in online debate. The analysis is also supplemented with interview data where relevant. In what follows, I outline *Pasientfokus*' core narratives in relation to its

demand for a local hospital, examine their spatialising discursive effects, and show how the group's political activity in this regard can be understood as a form of indirect region work.

The politics of hospital localisation

Pasientfokus' demand for the establishment of a third hospital in Finnmark located in Alta, as outlined above, is based on a narrative about uneven access to health care within the region; the argument that people in Alta, Kautokeino, and its surrounding rural areas are geographically disadvantaged in terms of their distance to the nearest local hospital with emergency care, geriatrics, and a maternity ward. As the analysis below will show, this narrative has two key dimensions. Firstly, similarly to *Aksjon sykehus*' campaign for Kirkenes Hospital around two decades before, Finnmark's geographical and climatic conditions, and its implications for adequate and timely health care access in the region, feature as important elements of the group's narrative, specifically in underpinning the claim that the question of hospital structure in Finnmark must take these characteristics into account. Secondly, this is intertwined with a critical narrative about the Norwegian hospital management approach overall, which raises questions about cost and value within the context of health care services run by principles associated with new public management. The narrative therefore portrays Alta as a region that is treated unfairly in comparison to Hammerfest, but also raises the question of health care access in Finnmark and rural areas generally as a regional policy issue. The following analysis examines these two dimensions in turn.

Firstly, the most central feature of *Pasientfokus*' narrative about uneven access to health care is the group's claim that the Alta region is unfairly disadvantaged, given its large population in the context of Finnmark, and its lack of a local hospital. One entry, asking if Norway has a political crisis of trust, summarises this argument in whole:

> Twice as many people live in Alta as in Hammerfest. Alta is Finnmark's largest city, with the most births and the most elderly people. Alta is the only city in Norway with a population of over 20,000 that does NOT have a hospital. [...] it is important for you who is reading this to know that the patient base in the Alta region is just under 30,000 patients, while the patient base for Hammerfest Hospital, that is, north of Sennalandet mountain pass, is just under 18,000. When you then consider [that] the distance between the Alta region and the local hospital in West Finnmark is 140-280 kilometres – one way – AND not least that transport

and travel to the local hospital is via a closed, convoy driven mountain pass – you should have some background understanding of the challenges faced by the majority in West Finnmark in a time of major climatic challenges with tougher, rougher, wetter, and wilder weather challenges (Pasientfokus, 05.02.2022).

As a consequence of this, the group argues, "many sick people have their quality of life reduced due to long journeys to local hospitals" (Pasientfokus, 24.05.2022). One key informant, in alignment with the view of the group, perceives this to be the result of differential treatment between people in different parts of Finnmark by politicians (Interview 5, 24.06.2021).

In many of the group's entries, maternity care is used as an example to illustrate the impact of long travel distances on patients. For instance, in an 8 March entry, *Pasientfokus* compares the situation of women in the wider Alta region with women in the capital city, asking why the long travel distances they must endure in Alta are acceptable:

> Women's solidarity, gender equality and feminism are possibly the most commonly used words in Norwegian politics today, 8 March. The voluntary work [*dugnad*][3] that women in our region will contribute to is to *endure the insecurity that the long journey to the maternity ward imposes on them.* [...] It must be allowed to ask on Women's Day on 8 March: How would politicians be received in Oslo if they said that women in labour in Oslo must accept being sent to Larvik to give birth in the future? How many would tolerate what women giving birth in Kautokeino have to accept – a 280-kilometre journey from Kautokeino to Hammerfest, or the distance from Oslo to Gothenburg? I'll tell you one thing – NO ONE would accept it. Nobody. So why should women in our region accept it? (Pasientfokus, 08.03.2022).

Another entry further emphasises the impact of long travel distances coupled with unreliable methods of transportation for women in the region, asking what it would take "for healthy women to be able to give birth in Alta – instead of the current system of long journeys to a maternity ward that is 140 kilometres out to sea, often hidden behind closed winter roads" (Pasientfokus, 09.04.2022). This is also captured by the first point in the group's parliamentary work plan, calling for a "full-fledged maternity ward for Alta":

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[3] *Dugnad* is a term that refers to volunteering for a common social good, for instance at the neighbourhood scale, but also heavily used by the Norwegian government during the Covid-19 pandemic to produce a sense of unity (e.g., Gjerde, 2021; Nilsen and Skarpenes, 2022).

No woman should be sent alone, without a midwife companion, in a private car in a convoy across Sennalandet mountain pass when labour is approaching. This must never happen! (Pasientfokus, 2021b).

While this narrative has been central in *Pasientfokus'* work for the establishment of a hospital in Alta, it is not unique to the Alta region. Similar narratives about health care access in general and distance to maternity wards in specific are also expressed in other parts of Finnmark – for instance in one key informant's sarcastic remark that everyone in Finnmark should receive education in nursing to be on the 'safe side':

> [T]he reason why I'm so pissed off, or angry or frustrated [long pause] it's because we are treated so poorly. […] you look at these women who have to give birth in the ambulance, because like a politician said, 'well well, why whinge about going through labour in an ambulance four times', right. […] people don't want to live in places where [you] have to attend a nursing education to ensure your children survive in case the air ambulance can't land, right (Interview 1, 11.06.2021).

This regional policy dimension of health care access and distance is also made explicit in other entries. This can be observed most clearly in how *Pasientfokus'* narrative on health care access in Finnmark questions purely economic calculations concerning the placement of hospitals. The group's narrative contrasts economic costs with individual (and implicitly, broader societal) costs, as in one of the group's parliamentary speeches on a Ministry of Health and Care Services white paper, recounted in a blog entry:

> President, we are talking about sick people. The health resources of patients are often such that when they come home from short examinations, but have travelled long distances, the patient's health is in minus. Yes, people are almost what we call *health bankrupt* – they have nothing to go on. […] Hospitals have their budget and *the patient manages another set of accounting and costs* related to *travelling, accommodation, loss of time, loss of quality of life* – and maybe a week on the couch after such a trip, that's not at all rare (Pasientfokus, 16.04.2022).

The same comparison is present in another entry, written as an "open letter to Helse Nord", the Northern Norway Regional Health Authority. In this entry, however, *Pasientfokus* goes further in connecting the question of cost and value to the provision of geographically equal access to health care services all over the country:

Health policy should be based on respect for human dignity and underpin *a fair distribution of rights and duties, equality, and equal access to services throughout the country*. Norwegian health legislation does not differentiate between people. When we talk about severity, benefits, and resources, it is the health authorities' *financial resources* that are often emphasised. The patients' *health resources* are rarely taken into account (Pasientfokus, 24.05.2022).

Altogether, this can be read as a more overarching critique of the regional health authority's social and spatial prioritisations regarding the placement of hospitals in Finnmark and the regional structures it reproduces; after all, Helse Nord was the decision-maker accused of not adequately evaluating alternatives to Hammerfest as the location of a new hospital in a report commissioned by Alta Municipality. The report claimed that the health authority's assessments did not meet state guidelines, in contrast to similar processes conducted by other regional health authorities (Oslo Economics, 2017).

Secondly, in light of other statements, *Pasientfokus*' narrative about uneven access to health care can also be read as a more fundamental critique of the regional health authorities overall. As briefly discussed in Chapter 7, the early 2000s saw a move of the specialised health care services from the purview of the political-administrative counties to state-owned health trusts (*helseforetak*), organised through four regional health authorities (Northern, Central, Western and South-Eastern Norway Regional Health Authorities). The establishment of health trusts signalled a shift to a more market oriented philosophy grounded in new public management, where there is traditionally "little room for direct politician-based governance" associated with "weighing up difficult value judgements and compromises between different interests" (Martinussen and Paulsen, 2004: 343). The same critique can be found as an explicit point in *Pasientfokus*' parliamentary work plan, which calls for the transformation of this model:

The health trust model must be changed/scrapped. The introduction of the health trusts in 2002 has created major challenges for sick people – *particularly in rural areas*. The purpose of new public management is to *maximise the owners' profits*. It is the state that finances all hospital services in Norway. A hospital cannot make a financial profit. The [hospital] trust model has made the finances a goal that *takes precedence over professional health considerations*. Here, Pasientfokus will work closely with organisations such as *Alternativ til helseforetaksmodellen* ('Alternative to the health trust model') (Pasientfokus, 2021b).

Similar critique of the Norwegian health trust model can also be seen in one entry which reproduces a debate article written by *Alternativ til helseforetaksmodellen* (of which *Pasientfokus*' member of parliament is a board member) (Pasientfokus, 20.02.2022). In yet another entry, *Pasientfokus*' further argues that maintaining adequate health care services in Finnmark requires consideration of other factors than economic cost:

> Since the election, I've received countless phone calls and emails from *all over Finnmark – and North Norway*. People are beginning to realise that Pasientfokus is important! Among them are doctors, nurses, technicians, fishers, reindeer herders, farmers, shop assistants, mothers and fathers who are standing up against the injustice committed by the health trusts – because the health trusts in Finnmark, as elsewhere, are *counting pennies in a health industry that is not compatible with the quality of life for the sick and their families*. We must remember that hospitals are built for the patients (Pasientfokus, 09.11.2021).

In entries such as the ones discussed in this section, a regional policy logic concerning Finnmark's hospital structure permeates *Pasientfokus*' region work in two, interrelated ways. The first relates to the goal of creating *bolyst* (a 'desire to live' in a certain place) and providing societal security via the establishment of a future-oriented hospital structure that benefits "our people [*flokken vår*] in Alta, Kautokeino, and the rural areas in ALL of Finnmark" (Pasientfokus, 31.08.2021). This perspective is important in light of current demographic trends and challenges around low population growth in Finnmark (e.g., Meld. St. 9 [2020–2021]), and can for example be seen in one interviewee's belief that improved access to maternity care is important for making the region attractive to young women (Interview 7, 26.04.2022).

The second dimension of *Pasientfokus*' region work in this regard, which still incorporates the theme of *bolyst*, can be observed in the group's call for consideration of broader socio-economic factors regarding hospital placement from a national security perspective. As discussed in Chapter 7, the dual regional policy and national security focus of documents such as the *Between geopolitics and social development* strategy paper (Nordområdestrategi, 2017) hence enables local demands for investment in societal development from such a standpoint. In line with this, there are examples where *Pasientfokus* refers to national security as an argument for improved preparedness in the region, such as through the establishment of a maternity ward in Alta. As argued in one of the group's parliamentary speeches, recited in a blog entry,

> If our goal is for people to live in Finnmark for security policy reasons, the people of Finnmark must actually gain something in return. […] Sustainable local communities show that young women must be safe when life's greatest joy happens and birth approaches (Pasientfokus, 06.04.2022).

A similar view, shared by an interviewee asking the rhetorical question "[…] why should I live here – should I live here to be a security political instrument in case NATO and Russia fall out […]?" when local politicians do not make decisions in Finnmark's best interest (Interview 7, 26.04.2022), can also be found in a debate article reposted on *Pasientfokus*' website, addressing the current Labour Party prime minister's concern about low population growth in Finnmark:

> In his speech in February, the prime minister said nothing about what the people of Finnmark have to gain – from a Norwegian security policy perspective – by filling Finnmark, the border to the Arctic and Russia, with everything from pregnant women, women in labour, small children, adults, and the elderly. *What do we gain from being a security policy assurance for Norway?* The current government and parliament must actually do some work to ensure the preparedness in Finnmark (Pasientfokus, 16.03.2022).

As such, through its interdiscursive adoption of regional and national security policy discourse, *Pasientfokus*' narrative about geographically uneven access to health care reflects more overarching debates about emergency preparedness and hospital infrastructure in North Norway. This is illustrated, for example, by the 'northern peripherality discourse' that emerged in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in North Norway (Gulbrandsen, 2022) – a discourse which also *Pasientfokus* engaged in. Overall, this discourse placed an emphasis on the *landsdel* region's geographical peripherality as well as processes of infrastructural and political peripheralisation to justify what became popularly referred to as a 'southerner quarantine'; a mandatory quarantine period for travellers from South Norway upon entering a number of northern municipalities. By spatially problematising pandemic restrictions in terms of centre-periphery and north-south divisions, this discourse successfully linked the region's self-proclaimed northern peripherality to some of the core political disputes behind what the media has labelled a 'North Norway rebellion' (Chapter 1).

Pasientfokus' hospital localisation discourse, based on its narratives about geographical barriers to health care access and the inability of the health trust system to take this into account, along with its adoption of a regional development and national security logic typical of High North policy in its argumentation,

similarly spatialises the political debate in terms of centre and periphery – but not unambiguously, as I argue in the next section. In examining *Pasientfokus'* mobilisation of contradictory discourses on space, this section addresses the group's indirect region work more explicitly, which, to reiterate, refers to region work of a more mundane or institutionalised character, secondary to the actor's primary purpose or goal.

A regional centre and periphery

In the above analysis, I have given an overview of the main features of the narratives underpinning *Pasientfokus'* demand for the establishment of a local hospital in Alta. In this section, the analysis will address three further aspects related to how these narratives about geographical barriers to health care access and regional policy are spatialised within the group's region work. Most prominently, I argue, the hospital localisation discourse is formulated in terms of, and reproduces the dynamics of, an intraregional political dispute between Alta and 'the rest' of Finnmark, with implications for how *Pasientfokus* for instance engages with and partially co-opts popular discourse on the regional reform. In other places, however, this intraregional framing is replaced with a more overarching but ambivalent national centre-periphery discourse. Finally, and as another example of how *Pasientfokus'* region work contributes to spatially problematising the hospital localisation debate, I address how the group's narratives highlight ethnicised dimensions of health care access. The following section approaches these three aspects in turn.

Firstly, as argued, *Pasientfokus* frames Alta's campaign for a local hospital in terms of an intraregional conflict between "Finnmark's largest city" and the rest of the county (Pasientfokus, 05.02.2022), mirroring centre-periphery and centralisation discourse at the national scale. This is most clearly signalled in terms of whose interests the group claims to represent: "Alta, Kautokeino, and its surrounding rural areas" (Pasientfokus, 2021b), and whom the group portrays as the obstacles to its objectives: "[s]ome politicians locally in Alta, Finnmark, and nationally [who] do not like Pasientfokus interfering in *the battle for one of the red seats on the Finnmark bench* in the parliament" (Pasientfokus, 13.07.2021). Beyond this, a loosely defined 'health establishment' is also portrayed as an opponent in and beyond Finnmark, such as in one entry posted a few months after the 2021 election, reflecting on

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> [...] the struggle *we ordinary people* have to wage against *the health establishment* [*helsemakta*] such as Finnmarkssykehuset, Helse Nord, various parties in the parliament, and various governments that come and go – you know, the ones that *differentiate between people* – even though they campaign on the promise that they won't differentiate between people (Pasientfokus, 09.11.2021).

The suggestion among some key informants that regional politicians are to blame for this (Interview 7, 26.04.2022), and that it is necessary to consider "who drinks coffee with whom" among regional elites to understand the conflict behind the hospital case (Interview 5, 24.06.2021), point to the same framing of the issue: that "something is rotten in old Finnmark county", as one entry claims in Shakespearean terms (Pasientfokus, 29.07.2021), be it due to elected politicians or bureaucrats in the health sector.

The intraregional dimension of the conflict can therefore be observed in the way the group positioned itself as an alternative to the established political parties in the 2021 election; as the only party that could truly speak for the "*ordinary people in the Alta region* [who] have not been heard*" (Pasientfokus, 20.01.2022), and as a "safety valve" in reaction to established politicians' lack of responsibility for "the consequences of their policies on the sick elderly, those in labour and the vulnerable in *our region and in the rural areas of Finnmark*" (Pasientfokus, 05.02.2022). *Pasientfokus* further differentiates itself from the established political parties by for instance emphasising that its campaign is run by an ordinary person who does not have a party apparatus behind them (Pasientfokus, 26.08.2021), and that the group does not rely on strategic advisors and PR agencies (Pasientfokus, 13.09.2021).

Pasientfokus' problematisation of the hospital issue as an intraregional dispute becomes particularly visible in how the group's region work co-opts and mobilises regional reform discourse in Finnmark more broadly. This is for example the case in one entry, authored by one of the electoral list candidates, which claims that Alta's interests are systematically neglected within Finnmark County:

> [T]his year's election is not just about one issue. It is deeply about *Alta's role in either Troms and Finnmark or what could be the solution – Finnmark as a separate county again.* What everyone may have realised is that *we cannot go back in time to the way things were.* Vadsø cannot be the obvious choice as county capital. Alta, which had almost 30 per cent of the population in old Finnmark, cannot live with being *neglected in a new Finnmark.* Nor should we take it for granted that Troms and Finnmark will be *divided into two according to the old county boundaries.* For years, *Alta politicians have sat at the bottom of the table* in the context of the county

council and parliament. This can no longer continue. *The hospital case is thus part of a bigger picture.* It is a clear example of irrational decisions that do not make the best possible use of limited resources. Population base, demographic trends, choice of optimal location, and transport considerations are ignored. Last but not least, the recruitment of professionals is not given due weight (Pasientfokus, 29.07.2021).

Another entry echoes the same perception that Alta is not given the consideration it deserves as the biggest city in Finnmark:

> In Finnmark, we are used to that *the majority in West Finnmark is not heard* in important matters for the future. We see it all the time: how the rule of the majority loses its value – in matters where the parties have *an agenda based on historical reasons* and not reasons that will serve the future challenges for *most people in West Finnmark.* This is at the core of why the population of Alta, Finnmark's largest city – where the majority of people in West Finnmark live – is now considering *staying in Troms* when the large county of Troms and Finnmark is dissolved (Pasientfokus, 05.02.2022).

Through entries such as these, *Pasientfokus'* narrative reproduces an image of West Finnmark in general and the Alta region in specific as a subregional 'we' separate from the rest of region, which despite being large in numbers is marginalised politically by other interests. This perceived divide between East and West Finnmark, and between Hammerfest and Alta within West Finnmark, is not unique to *Pasientfokus'* region work, however; it is also discursively reproduced in relation to the regional reform, and beyond. When asked, interviewees have for instance highlighted a lacking common public consciousness (*en felles offentlighet*) in the news media sphere in Finnmark as a contributing factor (Interview 10, 07.05.2022), while others suggests that the divide reflects long-standing conflicting political interest between coastal and interior areas of Finnmark (Interview 5, 24.06.2021; Interview 7, 26.04.2022).

Together, such entries suggest either implicitly or explicitly that Alta might be better off in 'new' Troms County after the dissolution of the Troms-Finnmark merger in 2024. As one entry suggests, it is politicians opposed to a renewed hospital structure "who will eventually push Alta out of Finnmark and anchor the city in Troms", after which "Kautokeino and Loppa may follow – and what will be left of Finnmark then?" (Pasientfokus, 05.02.2022). Consequently, the hospital localisation dispute and its local politics can be framed within the context of, and as a potential contributor to, Alta's greater support for the merger between

Troms and Finnmark than the rest of the county in the 2018 local referendum, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In contrast to *For Finnmark*'s direct region work and reform narrative, therefore, which emphasised the institutional importance of Finnmark County as a political-administrative guarantor for the region's interests, rights, and representation (Chapter 8), key informants less sceptical to the merger tend to speak of Finnmark in terms of its symbolic survival beyond its political-administrative existence (Interview 8, 28.04.22). In so doing, they emphasise that one's identity is not based on where bureaucrats have their offices (Interview 7, 26.04.2022), and that pragmatism about what delivers the best outcome in terms of hospital services to Alta, Kautokeino, and its surrounding rural areas must take precedence over a "border on a map" (Interview 5, 24.06.2021).

A final, visual example of how *Pasientfokus* portrays the Alta region's position within Finnmark can be observed in one of the group's entries on its Facebook page, which displays a map of Finnmark which purpose is to illustrate the perception that "in most debates *about* and *in* Finnmark, Alta and Kautokeino *don't exist*" (Pasientfokus, 2023) (Figure 9.4).

Figure 9.4 Pasientfokus' map of Finnmark
Source and cartography: Pasientfokus (Fagtrykk idé), 2023.

Alta and Kautokeino's placement outside the boundaries of the region is, deliberately or not, suggestive of several things: Alta Municipality's consultative referendum on joining 'new' Troms County in 2022, as well as the expected impact of Alta's absence from Finnmark in terms of its population size ("and what will be left of Finnmark then?", as an entry cited above states). In framing the issue of hospital localisation primarily in terms of an intraregional conflict, *Pasientfokus*' region work consequently draws attention to the heterogeneity of interests and political alliances within Finnmark, mirroring the gradual countification or fragmentation of the *landsdel* at the scale of the county, and constituting a counter-narrative to *For Finnmark*'s mobilisation of a uniform 'will of the people' (Chapter 8).

Secondly, in addition to the prominent framing of the hospital dispute at the regional scale, *Pasientfokus*' narrative also mobilises national centre-periphery discourse, albeit in an ambivalent way. At different times, the group both adopts a broader centre-periphery lens, and actively opposes it. For instance, in reaction to an election researcher's comments regarding *Pasientfokus*' appeal, the group takes issue with being described as a "protest list with a clear centre-periphery dimension". In an interview-style entry with its leader, the group argues that

> [The researcher] misses the mark in explaining the success of Pasientfokus. – He is probably right that many people vote for us in protest that the established parties have not been willing to listen to people and their fears of a health care system that does not provide security for life and health. However, *it is not a centre-periphery problem*. The bottleneck in the system is perhaps first and foremost with *Finnmark Labour Party*, but also [that] *other parties in our region* are not willing to recognise that a third of the county is without proper maternity and emergency services (Pasientfokus, 26.08.2021).

Likewise, the group chides national politicians for their characterisation of Alta as a 'periphery':

> Alta is the largest city in Finnmark. Some politicians have not realised this. This was made clear in the election debate [...] between Minister of Health and Care Services Bent Høie (the Conservative Party) and Centre Party leader Trygve Slagsvold Vedum. Both talk about Alta as a village in the periphery. It was like that once in the 1970s. But now almost 21,000 people live in Alta [...]. So when Vedum and Høie talk as if Alta is the outskirts – they have either been seriously misinformed – or they don't care about knowledge (Pasientfokus, 31.08.2021).

Combined, these statements suggest that the group attempts to avoid having the centre-periphery label attached to its arguments for the establishment of a local hospital in Alta. Rather than a narrative based on the region's peripherality and demand for government intervention, the group's region work contributes to the narrative that the region, based on its population size, is unfairly denied the hospital infrastructure it should be provided on rational grounds. The health authority's reply to the Alta Municipality commissioned report on regional hospital structure does, after all, acknowledge that "no other population concentration (approx. 20,000 inhabitants) of Alta's size has a longer distance to a hospital" in Norway (Helse Nord, 2017: 106). Emphasis on Alta's population size can also be understood in terms of attempting to tone down the impression in the rest of Finnmark that Alta is unfairly demanding (Pasientfokus, 01.07.2022; Interview 5, 24.06.2021).

In other instances, however, *Pasientfokus* does adopt a centre-periphery framing of its arguments, as in the previously discussed emphasis on regional policy dimensions of hospital localisation. This is often combined with discussing the issue of timely health care access at a higher spatial scale: either as something that affects all of Finnmark, or as a national issue. For example, in the lead-up to the 2021 election, *Pasientfokus* emphasised that the group "works for *distriktene* – also for Lakselv [North Sámi: *Leavdnja*, Kven: *Lemmijoki*] and Vadsø" (Pasientfokus, 31.08.2021), and seeks to strengthen health care services in these places too. In another entry published in the same period, the group claims that it is "not an Alta list" and explains that *Pasientfokus* has been "campaigning outside the core area of Alta and Kautokeino" on the issue that patients should be transferred directly to the university hospital in Tromsø when necessary, rather than via local hospitals (Pasientfokus, 26.08.2021).

Another example of hospital structure in Finnmark being framed as a broader regional issue in the pre-election period can be observed in the group's campaign material. In a play on the Labour Party's election slogan "now is the time to put regular people first" (Arbeiderpartiet, 2021), a *Pasientfokus* election poster (Figure 9.5) exclaimed that "now it's *everyone's* turn – because anyone can get sick. No matter where you live in Finnmark; this year you can vote Pasientfokus" (Pasientfokus, 13.09.2021). Here, Finnmark is consequently construed by *Pasientfokus* as a region with homogenous challenges within a national context; a region seen by others as a "'different' county, almost as something exotic" (Pasientfokus, 31.08.2021) or a "county of exception in relation to Norwegian health legislation" (Pasientfokus, 2021b).

Figure 9.5 Pasientfokus 2021 election poster
Source: Pasientfokus (13.09.2021).

While on the face of it, *Pasientfokus*' emphasis on challenges within all of Finnmark, and on having relevance beyond just the Alta region, contradicts its narrative about intraregional conflict, this contradiction must be seen in light of the group's adoption of populistic rhetoric around claims to representing "ordinary people" (Pasientfokus, 20.01.2022), unlike the "established parties" that were critical of *Pasientfokus* submitting an electoral list (Pasientfokus, 29.07.2021). The identification of a regional along with a national political and bureaucratic elite supposedly working against a hospital structure that is in everyone's interest thus enables the group to define both a regional and a national 'other', and to discursively mobilise both Alta's 'centrality' and Finnmark's 'peripherality' in its indirect region work.

The group's appeal to all of Finnmark did not begin and end in the lead-up to the election, however. In one entry, the group reassures its audience that it – or rather,

"people in Alta" as a whole – does not seek to dispossess other places in Finnmark of the services they already have:

> *People in the Alta region have never said no to a hospital in Kirkenes.* That is, in East Finnmark. *People in the Alta region firmly believe that Kirkenes Hospital must be completed!* Nor have we said that Hammerfest Hospital should be *closed down* – what we have asked for is an impact assessment of the hospital structure in West Finnmark. Where the majority of the population does NOT live in Hammerfest, but in Alta (Pasientfokus, 05.02.2022).

In more explicit centre-periphery terms, *Pasientfokus* also signals its affinity with similar groups or movements elsewhere in Norway. In one entry, for instance, written in reaction to the Solberg Government's remarks that the 'hospital map' of Norway is finalised, the group states that

> On behalf of our people in Alta, Kautokeino, and the rural areas of Finnmark, Pasientfokus does not accept the minister of health and care services' request for silence. Nor do we do so for *people in rural areas elsewhere in Norway*. We cheer on *Bunadsgeriljaen*, *Barselopprøret* and other protests (Pasientfokus, 05.08.2021).

Again, however, *Pasientfokus'* ambivalent adoption of centre-periphery discourse is expressed in other dominant ways of framing the issue at the national scale, for example in the group's critique of new public management in the hospital sector, such as in an entry titled "democracy in the pockets of the health trusts". This entry, in comparing the hospital localisation dispute in West Finnmark with an ongoing debate about hospital structure in the capital Oslo, argues that "there are some similarities", the most important of which being "that politicians do not listen to democracy and the affected parties" and that "unbiased impact assessments are not carried out – where the affected parties are heard" (Pasientfokus, 20.01.2022). As argued above, *Pasientfokus* is able to maintain its ambivalent centre-periphery discourse through its additional distinction between the interests of a 'health establishment' and 'ordinary people'.

Finally, in some instances *Pasientfokus'* narrative also frames the issue of hospital localisation in terms of internationally recognised indigenous rights and national responsibilities. This can for example be observed in an entry that calls on the central authorities to make Norway "a pioneering country when it comes to indigenous people's rights",

[…] because that must mean that Sámi women, like other women in Norway, should not have to travel 280 km for 4 hours when they give birth, and that elderly Sámi who are losing their language due to old age weakness, should not have to make dreary journeys in all kinds of weather. I'm just mentioning it: equality and the right to a maternity ward and geriatrics in Alta is a very important issue for the Sámi population that I challenge all parties in parliament to address (Pasientfokus, 21.05.2022).

In establishing its own credibility with regard to mobilising an indigenous rights framing, the group interestingly makes it clear that it previously *avoided* talking about the issue in this way, but that it eventually became necessary:

Pasientfokus is a list from Finnmark, *a multicultural county* with families of *Sámi, Norwegian and Kven* belonging. During the five years we have worked for a maternity ward and geriatrics in Alta, *we have not made distinctions between people.* We have worked for everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, profession, place of residence and family, because everyone can get sick. *We at Pasientfokus* can choose whether we want to wear the Sámi costume, the Kven costume or the Finnmark bunad – or whether we prefer the Sea Sámi costume, the Kautokeino costume or the Karasjok costume. […] We in Pasientfokus have not used our clothing as an identity marker in the fight for a maternity ward and geriatrics in Alta, Finnmark's largest city. *We could have done so, but thought it was unnecessary.* It is important to realise that most of the people on the Sámi parliament's electoral roll in Norway live in Tromsø, Kautokeino, Alta and Karasjok. This means that a maternity ward and geriatrics in Alta is within three of the country's largest Sámi villages and cities. *It may have been an error of judgement by us in Pasientfokus not to use the ILO Convention in our fight for a maternity ward and geriatrics in Alta.* We will rectify this (Pasientfokus, 21.05.2022).

While the reason behind previous hesitance to make use of these identity markers is not stated explicitly, it may not be unreasonable to read the statement in light of the more fluid local expression of ethnic identity common to coastal and fjord areas of Finnmark, which were strongly affected by the state's Norwegianisation policy (Olsen, 2018; Chapter 6). One further example of the group's more subtle expression of heterogeneous identity can be found in its slogan "for our people [literally 'herd'] in in Alta, Kautokeino, and its surrounding rural areas" (*For flokken vår i Alta, Kautokeino og distriktene*), which overlaid a picture of rock carvings of reindeer herds in Alta in many versions of its logo, for instance on its Facebook page, hint at a Sámi heritage (Pasientfokus, 2022). In defining who people from Alta are in *Pasientfokus'* parliamentary work plan, however, emphasis is placed on the common Alta identity and heritage found in these symbols:

People in Alta are those who have lived in the innermost part of the Alta fjord for generations. 6000 pictures in the rock in Hjemmeluft, Alta, show this. The close cooperation with the neighbouring municipality of Kautokeino has linked family ties between the inner fjord area and Kautokeino for generations. […] 'Half of Alta is made up of migrants from elsewhere in Finnmark.' That means that many people have families on the coast of Finnmark. And if people from Alta have families on the coast, then people from the coast also have families in Alta (Pasientfokus, 2021b).

Altogether, while not amounting to ethno-regionalist mobilisation, given the emphasis *Pasientfokus* places on multi-ethnic unity within both Finnmark and Alta, these entries constitute examples of how minority and majority population interests are drawn on, negotiated, and problematised in relation to other socio-spatial divisions within the region. *Pasientfokus*' representation of Finnmark as a fragmented region, however, can be placed in contrast to *Kystopprøret*'s framing of their fisheries policy struggle in broader northern terms, as the next section will address.

9.2 A united coast?

Kystopprøret (initially *Kystopprøret 2017*) is a party-politically independent organisation based in Vardø, a historical fishing village on the northeast coast of Finnmark. The organisation was founded in 2017 and describes itself as a heterogeneously composed group with "one thing in common: […] a close relationship with fisheries and coastal communities" (Kystopprøret, n.d.). The group's aim is to highlight "how fish can be used to create more jobs and activity along the coast", and to spread its message that "the natural resources belong to the people" (ibid). A mural depicting the organisation's logo, a raised fist holding a fishing gaff, can be found centrally in Vardø, where it was painted in the run-up to the 2017 parliamentary election (Figure 9.6). Unlike the two other interest groups addressed in this thesis, whose region work appears to largely emerge from and reflect a central leadership group or person, *Kystopprøret* is (at least more visibly) based on widespread grassroots participation, although it also is organised through a central group (ibid).

The popular engagement the group has generated in Finnmark can for instance be seen in organised demonstrations, online protest events during the pandemic, social media engagement, as well as contributions from the local cultural scene.

Moreover, the group is embedded within wider networks of related organisations, such as the collective petition for new fisheries and agricultural policy *Ta havet tilbake og jorda i bruk* ('Reclaim the sea and utilise the land'), which positions itself as working for small scale farming and agriculture, and sustainable domestic production, as well as *Kystalliansen* ('the Coastal Alliance'), a collective of organisations working for the transformation of current fisheries policy spanning from the fisheries sector, the environmental movement, Sámi actors, an anti-EU group, and *For Finnmark/For Troms* (Kystopprøret – Gjenreis Kystnorge, 2021; Ta havet tilbake og jorda i bruk, n.d.). In this analysis, *Kystopprøret* is therefore to a larger extent than the other interest groups considered in terms of the wider movement it is embedded in. Although for instance *For Finnmark*'s blog entries also display a multi-voiced discourse based on different participants and contexts (Chapter 8), *Kystopprøret*'s region work presents a case where the boundaries between the interest group and popular participation in a heterogeneous 'coastal rebellion' are blurred.

Figure 9.6 "The natural resources belong to all"
Mural in Vardø by Pøbel/Kystopprøret. Photographed by the author in June 2021.

The group makes use of a range of media and forms of expression in its activism. This includes entries on social media and its website kystopproret.no, their edited book *Tar dæm fisken, tar dæm oss alle* ('If they take the fish, they take us all'), and contributions from within the wider network of the movement, for instance in the form of protest songs, political cartoons, poetry, and crafts. The starting point of the analysis is the nineteen entries on *Kystopprøret*'s website, branded as a form of 'coastal enlightenment' aimed at "translating fisheries policy into something simple" that anyone can understand (Kystopprøret, n.d. c), along with their book from 2018. This is due to the low number of available website entries relative to the other groups. While the book is written by a range of contributors, focussing on *Kystopprøret*'s activity but also providing a historical take on current issues, the book is self-published by the group and edited by central persons within it. The analysis also draws on key informant interviews and a selection of protest songs related to *Kystopprøret*. More so than with *For Finnmark* and *Pasientfokus*, this part of the analysis is therefore based on a broader scope of empirical sources, reflecting the group's embeddedness in wider networks and local mobilisation. In what follows, I outline the narratives underpinning the group's struggle against the privatisation and centralisation of fisheries resources and examine the spatialising effects of its indirect region work.

A robbery of the coast

A key narrative that can be identified in *Kystopprøret*'s entries revolves around the enclosure of the commons that has taken place in the Norwegian fisheries sector over the last decades. Parts of this can be condensed into a 'robbery of the coast' narrative, which narrates how the natural resources have been taken from coastal communities and placed in the hands of large, private actors outside the region, often based in South Norway. One interviewee identifies this "robbery of [fishing] quotas from Finnmark", epitomised by one ship owner's infamous purchase and later sale of northern trawler companies (and quotas), as the event which set a wider coastal movement in motion (Interview 6, 12.04.2022; cf. Winther, 2019).

This narrative is present in several of *Kystopprøret*'s entries. For instance, one entry, signed by a self-proclaimed "fisher-farmer" (*fiskarbonde,* see Chapter 6 for the historical context of this occupational combination in North Norway), is written as a reaction to a contentious white paper on the organisation of the fisheries sector introduced by the Solberg Government in 2019, *A quota system for increased value creation* (Meld. St. 32 (2018–2019), before it was passed in the parliament in May

2020. The entry criticises the political process around the white paper and recalls the transformation of the fisheries sector that led to this point:

> It has been decided and proclaimed that FISH is the property of the people. So this trawler owner sold [his quotas] – and enriched himself on *the people's property*. And the chain reaction he started with this was fatal. Everyone knows, of course, that they *do not have the right to sell what they have borrowed*. But the state did not intervene. Since then, it seems that the trawler owners have largely had free reins to buy and sell quotas, with *ever more fish in fewer and fewer hands* on ever larger and larger boats (Kystopprøret, n.d. e).

Another entry, calling for mobilisation around this white paper in 2020, frames the act of contesting the proposed policy as an opportunity for returning ownership of unfairly privatised resources to coastal communities:

> There are too few pockets being lined by this wealth that is based on Norway's natural resources. A hand is being extended. A hope that we can stand together and *take back what was once ours* – the *fish* and all the *jobs* that come with it. The time is now, when all of Norwegian fisheries policy will be discussed in the Standing Committee on Business and Industry on 30 April and not least in the parliament on 7 May. Raise your voice, put your foot down, raise your fist and show that *the fish belongs to the people!* (Kystopprøret, n.d. f).

The 'robbery of the coast' narrative is present in more general terms in several key informant interviews as well, for instance in one interviewee's answer to the question of why they think there are 'rural rebellions' in Norway today:

> I feel it as soon as you say it – we are tired of being ignored. We are tired of not being heard. We are asked, but, but it's all pro forma, nothing happens. [...] You know, enough is enough. Everything, *everything is being taken away from us*. Fisheries, aquaculture, everything, we could be self-sufficient, but we supply the whole of Norway with everything. […] So *you're also taking away a culture*. An important culture, not just to do with the Sámi, but to do with the people who were born and raised here, including the Norwegians […] (Interview 4, 18.06.2021).

In *Kystopprøret*'s narrative, the political imperative of reclaiming a 'stolen' fisheries commons is connected to the geo-historical context of the fisheries tradition in Norway, and its societal consequences. Historically, fisheries legislation and key institutions favoured small scale coastal fishing, and were organised around explicit political goals regarding nation-building, fairness, and free enterprise

(Nilsen and Cruickshank, 2018: 54). The organisation of the fisheries sector therefore facilitated economic growth that was "socially and geographically highly dispersed" which consequently contributed to the consolidation of a "distinctive Norwegian maintenance of dispersed settlement through the national modernisation process" (ibid). This historical tradition is placed in contrast to later developments in the sector, as reflected on in one of *Kystopprøret*'s entries:

> Fishing has formed *the basis for settlement along the coast* and has been of *great socio-economic importance* to Norway. At the same time, many fishing communities have *declined* and people have moved away, often to the capital or to other larger centres. More and more of the fishery resources have ended up in the hands of *a few ship owners* and companies. *Countless jobs have disappeared* from the coast of North Norway as a result, and today much of the *raw material is exported* unprocessed for production in other countries (Kystopprøret, n.d. a).

It is particularly the privatisation and subsequent centralisation of fishing quotas that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s that constitute the key turning point in *Kystopprøret*'s narrative. The introduction of individual vessel quotas following a cod stock crisis in the late 1980s favoured fishing vessels that had caught large amounts of cod in the preceding time period, to the detriment of smaller and less competitive vessels (Nilsen and Cruickshank, 2018). One interviewee, who up until then had worked on the family boat as a young fisher, personally recalled the consequences of this 'quota crash' (*kvotekrakket*) on the possibilities of making a living in the sector (Interview 2, 15.06.2021).

The shift in fisheries management in this period – which also had its global counterparts (e.g., Knott and Neis, 2017) – has been described as "a transition from communal to individualised and more competitive exploitation of coastal and marine resources" which consequence has been the transformation of tenure rights into capital-dependent investment objects, with implications for social inequality (Nilsen and Cruickshank, 2018: 56). One dimension of this transformation has therefore been the emergence of what is often referred to as 'quota barons' (*kvotebaroner*) in public discourse (Grytås, 2014). In one of *Kystopprøret*'s entries, these themes of privatisation and centralisation of fisheries resources boil down to a few key questions; a "to be or not to be" contingent on the future of Norwegian fisheries policy:

> Where should the fish create jobs, in *Norway* or *abroad*? Who should own the fishing quotas? Who should be able to fish the fish, *large* or *small boats*? Where should the value creation end up, at *Aker brygge* [a harbourfront district in Oslo]

or in the *coastal communities*? Should fisheries legislation promote *privatisation* or safeguard the *common interest*? (Kystopprøret, n.d. c).

Frustration with this development also comes to expression in several interviews, for instance through a language of 'colonial' relations (Interview 6, 12.04.2022) or through the perception of an intentional depopulation of the region taking place as a way to exploit its natural resources:

> [I]f you know your history, if you can see the direction of international currents, if you can see that money rules over absolutely everything, […] then you will see that [Finnmark] will become a new Alaska – you cut off the population, there are so few people that it is just enough to be able to say that we have sovereignty considerations against Russia [...]. Quotas are taken from us, right, and you pollute our fjords with aquaculture, and you set up wind turbines […] then it's very unfortunate to have these mischievous people protesting and calling the media […] (Interview 1, 11.06.2021).

Altogether, *Kystopprøret*'s entries form a narrative in which the deregulation, privatisation, and centralisation of fisheries resources that have historically constituted a commons have ended up in the hands of big companies outside the region with the help of the state, reminiscent of Brox' (1984) analysis of the sector. As an extension of this 'robbery of the coast' narrative, moreover, *Kystopprøret*'s entries also revolve around what it identifies as the societal consequences of the current organisation of the fisheries sector. As hinted at in some of the entries cited above, while *Kystopprøret*'s narrative places some focus on direct employment in the fisheries sector, the group also identifies broader societal consequences of the current quota system, as can be seen in the group's claim that "fish is not just about the fishers, the boat, quotas, and old men in suits in the bureaucracy. Fish is about SOCIETY and people!" (Kystopprøret, n.d. c). This is reinforced by one interviewee's claim that *Kystopprøret*'s driving force has been youth in Vardø, not active fishers, who are perceived to support the movement but "have not been as, shall we say, radical and willing to take action as the rest of the population has been in Vardø" (Interview 10, 07.05.2022).

As such, it is the socio-economic impact of the privatisation and centralisation of fisheries resources on local coastal communities that are at the centre of this narrative; the view that "the quota sell-off has already had dramatic consequences for people on the coast" (Kystopprøret, n.d. e). Three key interrelated processes structure this narrative thematically: the offshore freezing and overseas processing of fish contra trawler obligations to deliver – later to offer – fish to local processing

plants (*leveringsplikt* and *tilbudsplikt*), loss of domestic jobs in fishing communities, and consequently the depopulation of the coast. Woven together, these themes produce a narrative of coastal economic decline, but also, importantly, of mobilisation and hope, since "historical experience shows that coastal communities must stand together" in order to win "the battle over who gets to use and exploit fisheries resources" (Kystopprøret, n.d. b). References to the societal transformations that have taken place as a result of the 'robbery of the coast' hence inform the spatial problematisations and discourses underpinning *Kystopprøret*'s indirect region work.

In an "open letter to the national party leaders", for example, *Kystopprøret* critiques the Solberg Government's 2019 *A quota system for increased value creation* white paper, arguing that it does not sufficiently take fishing communities' interests into account:

> [The white paper] paves the way for *further privatisation of the community's fishing rights*. It plans to increase the share of the total Norwegian catch to an ocean fishing fleet that largely exports the raw material unprocessed, which *weakens the basis for value-creating processing in coastal communities on land.* […] *The socio-economic perspective is absent* in the management of a fishery resource that by law belongs to the community, and the white paper says little about youth and recruitment – wasn't it supposed to be about the future? (Kystopprøret, n.d. h).

A similar argument is present in an entry written by the leader of *Norges Kystfiskarlag* ('the Norwegian Coastal Fisher's Association'), which contrasts the white paper with fisheries policy of the past, seen to safeguard the interests of coastal communities to a better extent:

> The white paper proposes that the trawler fleet should be allocated almost half of the total Norwegian catch. *This catch was previously linked to a delivery obligation to specific fish processing plants along the coast. This was intended to secure work and income for the coastal population.* The government does not want such an obligation. As a result, almost all trawler catches are delivered to freezer plants with very large capacity, and then *sent abroad for processing*. This has been reinforced by the fact that the largest open-sea coastal fleet also deliver their catches directly to the freezer plants (Kystopprøret, n.d. g).

These arguments are in line with the gradual transformation of the social contract underpinning the Norwegian fisheries sector that has taken place since the late 1980s. In this period, the ecological sustainability of the fisheries became a topic of significant importance, challenging the idea that former economic and social

sustainability considerations were necessarily symbiotic (Holm et al., 2015). The individual vessel quota regime that followed ultimately led to a prioritisation of economic sustainability over its social counterpart. Moreover, the new social contract did no longer guarantee "economic sustainability in the industry and coastal communities" through state subsidies, thus undermining the regional policy dimensions of the 'old' social contract (ibid: 66).

Reference to the regional policy dimensions embedded in the 'old' social contract and its legal anchoring is central especially in one entry, a letter to the parliamentary president signed by "mayors from Vardø to Trøndelag". Reacting to the government's policy proposal, it reads:

> In North Norway, *the economic base of many coastal communities has been severely reduced* in recent decades. The *population in North Norway is declining*. The government's proposal for a white paper on quotas will reinforce a development where larger parts of the Norwegian fisheries resources are concentrated in ever fewer and more powerful hands. The Marine Resources Act [*Havressurslova*] and the Participation Act [*Deltakerloven*] are intended to ensure that the common fisheries resources form *the basis for settlement, work, and value creation along the coast*. The future of many communities along the coast is at stake (Kystopprøret, n.d. d).

In an entry titled "why bother?", *Kystopprøret* also more explicitly addresses the broader societal consequences of current fisheries policy, and their motivation for continuing their work to 'reclaim' the fisheries commons:

> We are committed to the future. We are tired of *closures and out-migration*. [...] Or we are not just tired, we are angry. Angry at injustice. [...] But it is also love that makes us do this. Love of the sea and the coast. *We want to help create a better and more vibrant society*. A *living society* for our children, for us, for the coast and for the future. *For the survival of the kindergartens, schools, shops, sports clubs – the whole community* (Kystopprøret, n.d. b).

Some, however, are more critical of such narratives and the romanticisation of the past they potentially entail. As one interviewee stated,

> I don't think I know a single girl of young or fertile age who dreams about becoming a birthing machine and work in a fish processing plant on the coast in winter and poor weather most of the year [... laughs], they have completely different dreams for their futures [...] (Interview 7, 26.04.2022).

In the end, the reversal of current fisheries policy and return of fishing rights to 'the people' that *Kystopprøret* champions is by extension a call for a rebalancing of economic and social values underpinning current fisheries management in favour of regional development benefiting coastal communities and smaller fishing vessels. In the Broxian terms employed by some interviewees, this is a question of recognising the contradictions between different economic logics and rationalities regarding how the fisheries sector is organised – for instance in favour of year-round production or traditional seasonal work (Interview 6, 12.04.2022; Interview 10, 07.05.2022). However, as the following section will show, the group's spatial problematisation of the issue is not uniform but varies across different entries. In further examining *Kystopprøret*'s indirect region work, the section therefore explores the implications of the group's scale framing on the regional imaginaries it (re)produces.

Scaling the fisheries struggle

Throughout *Kystopprøret*'s narrative about the liberalisation (that is, enclosure of the commons via the introduction of tradable quotas) of fisheries policy and privatisation of fisheries resources, and its socio-economic consequences for coastal communities, there are tensions between a discursive regionalisation of the fisheries struggle and an 'upward' scale framing similar to what can be observed in the other actors' counter-discourse. The primary spatial scales at which the issue is framed by *Kystopprøret* in the empirical material is at a regional (North Norwegian) and national scale. As the analysis below will show, though the group's discourse enables a framing of the issue in terms of a broader, global scale, this is mostly absent or left implicit in the material.

On the one hand, the fisheries struggle is in many ways framed in terms of the North Norway *landsdel* region. As an "open letter to the national party leaders" by *Kystopprøret* emphasises, "most coastal communities in the north have experienced the same as Vardø" (Kystopprøret, n.d. h). Although the organisation has been based on grassroots mobilisation in Finnmark, specifically Vardø – and though, as one interviewee emphasises, there are differences between Finnmark, Troms, and Nordland in terms of how the fisheries sector is organised (for instance related to the distribution of offshore and coastal fleets) (Interview 6, 12.04.2022) – several of the entries cited above discuss the matter in terms of a broader, northern scale. In listing the consequences of current Norwegian fisheries policy, for example, the organisation points to the existence of a domestic "north-south dimension where the north loses shares" relative to the south (Kystopprøret,

n.d. c). In the same entry, posing the question of whether value creation should end up "at Aker brygge or in the coastal communities" further juxtaposes southern private and northern communal beneficiaries, given that Aker brygge, a popular Oslo harbourfront neighbourhood, was formerly the location of the industrial investment company seen by *Kystopprøret* as the main perpetrator of the coast's robbery.

Artistic contributions from within the wider network of the coastal rebellion similarly emphasise northern unity. Protest song lyrics written in an unmistakably northern vocabulary variously refer to people "from Vardø to Melbu" turning their "backs in contempt" to the minister of fisheries and being "ready to fight" (Kofoed, 2017; reproduced in Kystopprøret, 2018: 63), and to coastal communities stretching from Lofoten and Vesterålen in Nordland county to East Finnmark such as "Moskenes, Vestvågøy, Hadsel, Bø, Andøy, Torsken, Berg, Skjervøy, Hammerfest, Nordkapp, Lebesby, Gamvik, Berlevåg, Båtsfjord, Vardø, Sør-Varanger" constituting a coastal rebellion and exerting pressure against a decades-long destruction of "our beautiful coast" (Gjersvik and Elverum, 2017; reproduced in Kystopprøret, 2018: 78). One song, based on a local fisher and Centre Party politician's colourful language directed at the government's fisheries policy, provides an illustrative example where stereotypically northern expressions explicitly contribute to the spatialisation of *Kystopprøret*'s indirect region work (Figure 9.7).

Similarly to *For Finnmark* (Chapter 8), the group engages in a metadiscourse about their language use, specifically regarding their use of a "vernacular language" in order to effectively mobilise and "be heard" (Kystopprøret, 2018: 20). As *Kystopprøret* comments regarding the lyrics of the song in question and a humorous political cartoon depicting it: "northerners are known for direct speech", which becomes a discursive resource that "awoke the media and the politicians" (ibid: 17). A similar view is expressed by one interviewee in reference to coastal areas of Finnmark more generally, and the coastal rebellion specifically, commenting that "the people on the coast – I'm from the coast myself – they speak frankly, they fight in a different way [than the rest of Finnmark]" (Interview 5, 24.06.2021). *Kystopprøret*'s strategic language use and its northern, regional connotations in popular culture consequently contributes to a discursive regionalisation of the fisheries struggle. Overall, more so than the other actors, *Kystopprøret* discursively frames the fisheries struggle at the scale of the North Norway *landsdel*, based on what is portrayed as a common regional history and common regional adversaries.

The Bangsund song

A joyful singalong for Nordting and other happy gatherings!

Erik Stifjell
tekst: Vegard Bangsund

♩=120 Hillbilly mood

F · Dm · B♭ · C⁷

You cock-suc-king, bal - lic-king bas - tards, e-nough is e-nough!

F · Dm · B♭ · C⁷

Stea - ling all re - sour - ces and lea - ving us with no - thing!

Dm · Gm · C · F · D⁷

Kiss my dir - ty ass - hole, give back all our fish, you

Gm · C · F

poor, fuck - king don - key - dicks!

9.7 The Bangsund song, English translation
Source: Nordting (2019).

There are still, however, times in which Finnmark is framed as particularly vulnerable to current fisheries policy within this discourse; as being on the front line of exposure to the negative consequences of this form of privatisation, where many communities are close to the threshold of demographic sustainability due to capital interests gaining control of a large portion of the fisheries resources (Interview 6, 12.04.2022). *Kystopprøret*'s close organisational relationship to both *For Finnmark* and *For Troms*, moreover, expressed both through participation in larger networks as described above, and to some degree through the overlapping involvement of individuals, also indicates that regional government and the county scale remain points of reference within the broader North Norway framing. Several interviewees have stressed, for example, the view that Finnmark County Council should be given more power to decide over fisheries and aquaculture matters locally (Interview 6, 12.04.2022), but that the central authorities "would not have dared to leave such a decision with the 'foolish' people of Finnmark [*de tullete finnmarkingene*]" (Interview 10, 07.05.2022). The same

interviewee also emphasised that the organisations *For Finnmark* and *Kystopprøret* share a similar 'rationality' based on the region's history and identity, as seen in the question "why the hell should we bow down to the central authorities once again?" and the expression that "enough is enough" (Interview 10, 07.05.2022), hence drawing on similar centre-periphery and local government discourses as those outlined in Chapter 8.

On the other hand, however, *Kystopprøret*'s narrative is also framed in terms of national solidarity and interests, especially with regard to preserving Norwegian resources and jobs, as can be observed in for instance the following entry:

> These are jobs that *belong to Norway and the people, US. OUR resource* is being sold off in excess by big greedy companies and corporations that have mandatory quotas [*pliktkvoter*]. [Companies] that only think about profit and not quality, and that do not take social responsibility (Kystopprøret, n.d. f).

The overseas processing of fish creating employment for "tens of thousands of people" in Europe and Asia is portrayed as a threat not only to Norwegian jobs (Kystopprøret, n.d. h), but also to the quality of the product, as one entry, accompanied by a photo of cardboard packages of frozen fish products captioned "well… real Norwegian, packaged in China. Bon appétit!" warns:

> Recently, there were major media reports about Norwegian fish being sent to China and filled with chemicals before being sent back and ending up on Norwegian dinner plates (Kystopprøret, n.d. a).

Another dimension of this upward scale framing of *Kystopprøret*'s fisheries struggle can be discerned in the group's call for unity across the domestic north-south divide, which is addressed to southerners; "it affects *you too*". In so doing, the group frames the issue as having implications for all Norwegians:

> It's time for *unity*, because *we are being robbed* of what our country was built on – the fish! The coastline is long and the communities are many. The last great goldmine is about to be *stolen from us. This concerns us all.* It can be easy to shake your head at all the fuss about this fish. Maybe because the gold mine is in the north. Maybe you think it has no consequences for you as a person. Or maybe because you think fisheries policy doesn't affect life in the south or in the big city. But many people are wrong! *It affects you too. It affects us all. The entire population of Norway.* It is just as easy for us in the north to scoff at the ignorance of those in the south: "They don't care. They don't understand us. It doesn't really concern

those in the south either." BUT IT DOES! *The time has come to stand united* (Kystopprøret, n.d. f).

As one key informant describes, while a related group within the broader coastal rebellion also originated in Finnmark because of the "robbery of quotas" that took place, it was a strategic decision to mobilise the whole coast, including West Norway, because the same processes are taking place everywhere. This is because, as the informant sees it, this is not a *geographically* divided struggle but one playing out between "capital forces and people" regardless of location, an approach also *Kystopprøret* has adopted (Interview 6, 12.04.2022). In other words, this interviewee frames the coastal rebellion as a response to social, political, and economic processes of marginalisation rather than primarily a process of spatial peripheralisation (cf. Kühn, 2015). Shifting the problem representation from a primarily geographical north-south struggle to a more politically defined issue subsequently opens up for the spatial rescaling of the problem. Examining the wider network in which *Kystopprøret* is engaged, for example, which brings together fisheries associations, environmental organisations, Sámi organisations, *Nei til EU* ('No to EU'), a labour union, *For Finnmark* and *For Troms*, and the petition *Ta havet tilbake og jorda i bruk*, as described above, suggests that the broader issue is socially and spatially defined beyond the coast too. This can for instance be observed in the support expressed by the Coastal Alliance to reindeer herders experiencing encroachment from the wind power industry, stating that "we are all threatened by the same capital forces at home and abroad that want to exploit the natural resources in Finnmark" (Pedersen, Osland and Andersen, 2023).

In line with this, one interviewee argues, the common denominator in the fisheries struggle, the wider environmental movement, the recent 'rural rebellions', and the agricultural movement in Norway is a more general conflict over natural resources and an opposition to neoliberal policy (Interview 6, 12.04.2022). In this respect, *Kystopprøret*'s narrative does have evidence of a broader scale framing which presents local socio-economic decline as a result of global processes; however, its ultimate consequences remain implicit. Rather, the group's narrative, revolving around the loss of jobs regionally and nationally in the fisheries and fish processing industry, constructs a parallel to what Harvey (1995) once described as the risk of myopia in strategies of place-based militant particularism (Chapter 2). To conclude, the final section of this chapter addresses the effects of both *Kystopprøret* and *Pasientfokus*' layered scale framing on its indirect region work and related (re)production of different regional imaginaries.

9.3 Enacting the region in counter-discourse

To return to the objective of this analysis, to examine how regionalisation discourses performed by state and local actors interact with region work beyond the administrative and political shape of regions in Norway, a brief synthesis of the two empirical illustrations is necessary. Most strikingly, both *Pasientfokus* and *Kystopprøret*'s region work draws on and reproduces broader centre-periphery discourse, though in different ways. Placing these organisations' discourse in the context of what has been described as contemporary processes of rural alienation in Norway provides possible explanations as to why. As Vik, Fuglestad, and Øversveen (2022) contend, two parallel processes can be understood as constituting root causes of recent rural rebellions more broadly. Firstly, they argue, rural workers across the country have become disenfranchised from "industries and resources they have traditionally controlled" as a result of economic and technological change (ibid: 204); coastal fishers providing a case in point of this in the north of Norway. Secondly, they argue, a political "dismantling of specifically rural policies and institutions" has taken place over time, including moves towards "'decentralised concentration', and the rolling back of public services" (ibid) – of which Alta's campaign for a local hospital can be understood as an expression. Together, both *Pasientfokus*' claim that the state has failed to provide adequate health care services in Alta and its surrounding rural areas, and *Kystopprøret*'s resistance to the loss of fisheries resources and a traditional way of life to capital interests primarily located outside the region, can be seen in light of these more general processes. Though faced with different material circumstances, the spatial discourses shaping each group's region work contribute to Finnmark's discursive counter-institutionalisation on the basis of resistance within a domestic centre-periphery relation; what some have critiqued as a somewhat essentialising tendency in the search for a singular northern identity (e.g., Fulsås, 1997).

The groups' engagement in region work also differs in significant ways, however. *Pasientfokus*, on the one hand, defines its struggle for the establishment of a local hospital in Alta as a confrontation with primarily *regional* elites, as opposed to the central authorities. Finnmark County, as such, is portrayed as an obstacle, rather than as a safeguard to, local (Alta-based) interests. Finnmark's significance as a region and regional identity is limited to its symbolic shape in this discourse, viewed in separation from for instance the offices of regional bureaucrats or a 'border on a map'. This can be contrasted with the way *For Finnmark* portrays

the region's formal, institutionalised existence as a guarantor for rights and representation.

Moreover, while *Pasientfokus* mobilises centre-periphery discourse, it does so in a relatively ambivalent way. Contesting that Alta is a periphery, the group's case for a local hospital is based on arguments around local demand and population size. At the same time, however, regional policy and relations between centre and periphery both within and beyond the region remain backdrops in the group's framing of these issues in terms of a common regional scale as well as in national terms. *Pasientfokus*' ability to do so may be related to the inherently ambiguous meaning of the *distrikt* concept in the first place, denoting both rurality and a regional contrast to the national centre (Knudsen, 2018), as well as the group's distinction between the interests of political and bureaucratic 'elites' and 'ordinary people'.

Kystopprøret, on the other hand, frames the fisheries struggle primarily in terms of wider regional (North Norwegian) and national scales, as such contributing in different ways to the region's (re)production. Where Finnmark is central to the group's region work, such as through its emphasis on Finnmark's uniqueness in the case of the fisheries industry, its discussion of the region as particularly vulnerable to outside domination, and its cooperation with interest groups such as *For Finnmark*, there is nonetheless not evidence of a strong symbolic 'countification' of its counter-discourse. Certainly, some within the coastal movement call for strengthened responsibilities and more autonomy over fisheries resources at the level of regional government, emphasising the county council as the most appropriate body for managing Finnmark's natural resources in the people's interest, and as such reinforcing the institutional and political significance of the region and regional boundaries. *Kystopprøret*'s overarching framing of the issue, however, rests symbolically on the North Norway *landsdel* and shared coastal culture, as well as the country as a whole. This framing has implications for how *Kystopprøret*'s 'adversaries' are construed – not, as in the case of *For Finnmark*, a competing northern 'centre' (Tromsø city), but primarily in terms of South Norwegian and foreign industry actors. While both groups portray the central authorities as a shared adversary, *Kystopprøret* nonetheless views the national scale as an important part of the solution to the problem, urging the state to "take back control of fisheries resources" (Kystopprøret, n.d. e).

Another spatialising effect of *Kystopprøret*'s region work emphasising unity at a broader regional and national scale, however, is that it contributes to producing an ostensibly simpler and more clear-cut us-and-them distinction than what is

potentially more complicated and internally contentious. This to some extent conceals, for example, the complicity of northern actors in taking advantage of the law to sell quotas in South Norway at a higher profit, as documented by Grytås (2014), or how a similar centre-periphery discourse and 'robbery of the coast' narrative has been mobilised against the introduction of ground rent tax on aquaculture in fear of job losses (e.g., Sætre and Østli, 2022). While the distinction between geographical and political dimensions of the fisheries struggle goes some way in identifying and accounting for these tensions, it does not address those who are sceptical of the narrative that coastal communities will become revitalised once the fishing rights are 'reclaimed' altogether.

As these examples illustrate, an actor's discursive region work is certainly not based on neutral descriptions of 'reality', but rather denotes the production or reproduction of regional imaginaries that are highly political, supported by resonance with and interdiscursive mobilisation of broader socio-spatial discourses, and contingent on uneven access to discursive resources and communicative events.

10 Conclusions

This thesis set out to advance the current understanding of processes that are involved in the (re)production of regions through closer theorisation of regional institutionalisation processes as a set of socio-spatial practices. To this end, I posed the following overarching research question: *how do actors discursively enact the institutionalisation of regions?* Expanding on this, I formulated three interrelated sub-questions with the aim to illuminate conceptual and theoretical dimensions of the overarching research question: a) *how can such discursive regional institutionalisation practices be conceptualised*, b) *what are the implications of this for understanding political struggle over regions*, and c) *what are the implications of this for the theorisation of regionalisation?*

To answer these questions, the thesis has examined interrelated political geographies of region work; what I have discussed as the discursive representations and practices involved in contested regionalisation processes in Norway in the last decade. In Chapter 3, region work has specifically been conceptualised as both direct and indirect patterns or acts of socio-spatial practice that contribute to a region's (re)production. The performance of region work is hence understood as not limited to certain actors or scales but refers to the multiplicity of ways in which regions are enacted and contested in different spaces and institutional settings, mobilising different sets of knowledges and practices. From *systematic* and *institutional activism* to *institutional advocacy* and more *everyday practices*, the empirical focus has consequently been on the implementation of and resistance against the regional merger between Troms and Finnmark counties in North Norway, along with actors' indirect region work more broadly related to regional mobilisation along centre-periphery lines. The objective of this concluding chapter is to provide a synthesis of the theoretical and analytical conclusions of the study, and through this, to highlight its wider contributions to the literature. First, however, I will briefly summarise the empirical chapters and their main findings.

Empirically, this thesis has addressed the overarching question of how different actors discursively enact the Finnmark region, from the state-led region work of

the Solberg Government to the direct and indirect counter-institutionalising region work of regional elites and grassroots movements. Chapter 7 explored state-led discursive regionalisation strategies in the context of a contested regional reform implemented by the Norwegian government in 2020. The chapter examined different aspects of the government's *institutional activism*, both more broadly and specifically in relation to the Troms-Finnmark merger: from the way in which it portrayed the regional reform as an inevitable response to challenges raised by 'glocalisation' and new regionalism, to its attempt to facilitate new regional identities through the delineation of new electoral districts corresponding with merged counties. The chapter also explored the impact of national High North policy on the reform, contending that this influence can be conceived of as a form of indirect *institutional advocacy* that was particularly discernible in the way North Norway, and specifically Finnmark County, became a prime candidate for merger based on discourses on regional development, weak professional environments, and national interest. This chapter therefore highlighted some of the resources available to state actors in performing discursive region work, from the role of agenda-setting white papers in producing, justifying, and circulating discourses on competitive and functional regional spaces and the concrete regional constellations envisioned to satisfy this, to the legislative and institutional means to enact and materialise this in policy. The chapter also, however, pointed to the limitations of state-led region work in the short term; that is, to what degree such actors can effectively institutionalise more identity-based dimensions of a region from 'above', in contrast to its ability to formally institutionalise a region's political-administrative shape.

Chapter 8, in contrast, examined how the Norwegian government's discourse on regional reform has been contested locally in Finnmark. Specifically, the chapter addressed how regional mobilisation against the Troms-Finnmark merger has taken shape, through an analysis of the *systematic activism* of the public interest group *For Finnmark*. The analysis identified two key narratives related to the centralising effects of the reform at the regional scale and the reform's perceived undemocratic implementation. Discursive mobilisation of regional history and identity was a key component of *For Finnmark*'s counter-institutionalisation narratives, along with the group's claim to represent the 'popular will' in Finnmark, supported by reference to the overwhelming majority against the merger in a local referendum. The group, which itself to some extent represents a regional political elite, could be seen as using its position partly inside and partly outside the formal political arena to engage in more polemical and strongly worded region work than its counterparts within for instance the county council.

While claims to regional uniqueness based on a history of outside domination was central to this, the group also framed their struggle at higher spatial scales through mobilising national centre-periphery and local democracy discourse also pertaining to places elsewhere, significant in the context of the last years' rural rebellions in Norway.

Finally, Chapter 9 examined the region work present in the discourse of two other public interest groups based in Finnmark: *Pasientfokus* and *Kystopprøret*. This was in order to explore how the formal and informal direct region work discussed in the two preceding chapters interacts with, and is potentially transformed through, *systematic activism* and more *everyday practices* that are partially detached from the political-administrative shape of the region. Analytically, these groups' region work could be characterised as primarily indirect, identified through the implicit spatiality of their discourses about the societal consequences of hospital localisation (*Pasientfokus*) and fisheries policy (*Kystopprøret*), given that discourse is always dialectically related to the spatial. Important aspects of these groups' region work also bordered on the more direct, however, illustrated by for instance *Kystopprøret*'s suggestion that the county is best positioned to manage Finnmark's fisheries resources, and *Pasientfokus*' contrasting suggestion that the county acts as a barrier to the interests of Finnmark's largest city. Both groups have engaged in region work from a particular socio-spatial standpoint, be it coastal villages with downward population trends or a more urban and central position, while at the same time mobilising different discursive scale frames or spatial problematisations which for instance emphasise intraregional conflict (*Pasientfokus*) or wider *landsdel* unity (*Kystopprøret*). Together, beyond providing an empirical account of how different actors have discursively engaged in region work pertaining to regional institutionalisation and counter-institutionalisation processes in Norway, these three chapters have also informed the more conceptual and theoretical dimensions of the research questions, which the remainder of the conclusion now turns to.

To conceptualise discursive regional institutionalisation practices such as those outlined above, this thesis has developed a framework for analysing processes of regional institutionalisation that foregrounds actors and the region work they engage in. In presenting a typology of region work, hence expanding the original notion (cf. Paasi, 2010), I have conceptualised broad types of practices actors engage in when enacting regions, while at the same time recognising that these categories may be overlapping, blurred, and comprised of bundles of practices, discursive and otherwise. The analysis, summarised above, has by extension empirically highlighted the range of discursive practices drawn on by a diverse set

of actors in the context of a contested regional merger in combination with popular mobilisation around centre-periphery cleavages. This emphasis on discourse does not dismiss the significance of non-discursive dimensions of region work, but rather reflects a specific analytical choice of entry point and theoretical understanding of discourse as a subset of social practice.

The conceptualisation of region work as a two-dimensional typology in this thesis, which emphasises both its forms and contexts, has addressed the dialectical spatiality of region work more explicitly than previous works have done. This conceptualisation reflects that region work has spatial *effects* but is also spatially *structured*. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, this allows for the acknowledgement that the socio-spatial context of region work matters: in terms of where region work is performed from (socially, geographically, institutionally, and so on), the relations of power embedded in and enacted through these positions, the discursive and non-discursive resources available to different actors to perform region work, and the rules and norms these performances are made in interaction with (both discursively and otherwise). Such a conceptualisation consequently avoids one-sided emphasis on agency within its practice orientation, though not by swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction to suggest a deterministic relationship between the spatial and the discursive.

An illustrative example of how region work may be spatially structured can be seen in Chapter 8's discussion of *For Finnmark*'s metadiscursive reflections on the use of dialectal expressions and swear words. As one blog entry asked, would the group, and by extension people from Finnmark, be perceived as (in)capable of being *herre i eget hus* (one's own master) by decision-makers when using a language that may be socially unacceptable in other contexts? Or can dialectal expressions and swear words be a discursive resource that can signal regional unity and bring distinctiveness to a cause in order to catch the attention of national media and politicians, as discussed in Chapter 9 in relation to *Kystopprøret*? The analysis has suggested that it is valuable to address the socio-spatial context from which a discourse emerges in terms of its enabling or constraining effects on actors' region work. Likewise, acknowledging the social-spatial contexts that region work is performed within can also inform us about actors' multi-voiced and heterogeneous discursive strategies. From the critical realist perspective on semiosis adopted in this thesis, the spatiality of region work reflects the socio-spatial structuration of discourse.

Another consequence of conceptualising region work in such terms is that it offers a lens for exploring how actors' performances of region work are enabled or

constrained not just in discursive, but also in material and institutional terms. An illustration of this can be found in how key features of Finnmark's institutional shape, such as the county council and the Finnmark Act, have enabled civic regionalism and identity-based claims to cultural specificity and natural resources. More concretely, the analysis in Chapters 7 and 8 has highlighted that the efficacy of direct region work aimed at regional institutionalisation and counter-institutionalisation respectively should be examined in light of the depth and multiple layers of a region's institutionalisation; the way in which regions are more than discursive constructs, being made up of a number of material and institutional features too.

The analysis has addressed, for instance, how the legal codification of nineteen electoral districts in the constitution, and the support for its preservation due to concerns about geographical representation in the parliament, constituted a barrier to the Norwegian government's attempt at identity-building around reshaped national electoral districts. Meanwhile, in the case of *For Finnmark*'s counter-institutionalising region work, features such as the Finnmark Act, the county council's organisation of a local referendum, and the existence of a broader centre-periphery cleavage embedded in the national consciousness, can from this perspective be understood as providing a multi-layered resource and context from which the group could produce a salient counter-discourse. Examples from the analysis hence additionally shine light on how and why regions can become (un)expected objects of political struggle in the first place, in cases where their significance stretches beyond the symbolic to encompass what they offer a regional 'we' politically, materially, and institutionally. Its main implication for the understanding of political struggle over regions is therefore the need to exercise caution about interpreting identity mobilisation in regionalist discourse as an isolated 'factor' as opposed to something deeply embedded in other, extra-semiotic dimensions of a region. Without adopting a purely instrumental approach, regional identity can nonetheless be understood as a discursive resource which may be mobilised by different actors both in favour of and against regional mergers, since the definition of a regional 'we' always involves material, political, and institutional stakes, and struggles over these.

What, then, are the implications of this study for how we theorise processes of regionalisation – the contested production of regional space? Situated between two related literatures, one on state-led processes of regionalisation and state rescaling, and another on regionalist contestation, this thesis has provided a conceptual framework for critically examining what actors *do* when they engage

in region work. In drawing on, and advancing, previous work on this notion, this thesis should therefore be read as a contribution towards the conceptual consolidation of these literatures (cf. Paasi et al., 2018).

The conceptualisation of region work proposed in this thesis is compatible with understanding regionalisation processes as political-geographical strategies of ordering space, from the cross-national diffusion and strategic utilisation of new regionalist policy discourse, to the ways in which regional spaces are politically produced and materialised (e.g., Brenner, 2003; Harrison, 2010). The framework's emphasis on actors and their practices of region work can hence attune analyses of regionalisation and region-building processes to the region work performed by actors such as states (Jonas, 2013; Jonas and Moisio, 2018), bureaucrats (Myksvoll et al., 2022), regional elites (Frisvoll and Rye, 2009), and regional advocates (Zimmerbauer et al., 2017). The framework also enables closer consideration of the different means through which such actors perform region work, from legislation and political debate to the production of authoritative knowledge through commissions and official reports. Yet the conceptual framework equally facilitates examination of what I in this thesis discuss as regional *counter-institutionalisation*; the process through which actors seek to denaturalise or deconstruct dominant regional representations, for instance through mobilisation or revitalisation of extant regional symbols, or through the generation or promotion of new regional imaginaries. This emphasis on resistance identities (Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013) and struggles over processes of territorial rescaling (Frisvoll, 2016) hence directs attention to how actors such as public interest groups utilise different scale framing strategies, and appeals to regional history and identity, to perform region work in both formal and informal contexts. Altogether, this provides a tool for examining the contested production of regions both from 'above' and 'below'.

Primary sources

Interviews

NO.	DATE	FORMAT	DURATION	TOPICS
1	11.06.21	In-person	01:41:57	Centralisation, fisheries policy, hospital structure, Norwegianisation, regional history, regional identity, regional policy, regional reform, security policy
2	15.06.21	Video call	01:23:29	Local democracy, regional history, regional identity, regional reform, rural rebellions, wind power
3	17.06.21	In-person	01:01:20	Barents region cooperation, High North policy, regional history, regional identity
4	18.06.21	In-person	00:53:38	Centralisation, fisheries policy, Norwegiansiation, regional reform, rural rebellions, wind power
5	24.06.21	Phone	00:53:56	Hospital structure, local democracy, regional reform, rural rebellions
6	12.04.22	Phone	01:06:37	Fisheries policy, local democracy, regional reform, rural rebellions
7	26.04.22	In-person	01:52:02	Centralisation, fisheries policy, hospital structure, Norwegianisation, regional history, regional identity, regional reform, security policy
8	28.04.22	In-person	Not recorded	Centralisation, Norwegianisation, regional identity, regional reform
9	04.05.22	In-person	00:51:38	Barents region cooperation, centralisation, High North policy, local democracy, regional identity, regional reform
10	07.05.22	In-person	01:28:23	Fisheries policy, local democracy, Norwegianisation, regional history, regional identity, regional policy, regional reform

Official documents

White papers (Meld. St., formerly St.meld.), propositions to the parliament (Prop.), committee recommendations (Innst.), green papers (NOU), county council protocols, and other documents. An English translation of a document's title is provided in cases where I include the title in the analysis for ease of reading.

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Innst. 385 S (2016–2017) Innstilling fra kommunal- of forvaltningskomiteen om Ny inndeling av regionalt folkevalgt nivå. Oslo: Kommunal- og forvaltningskomiteen.

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