Prefectoral Systems and Central–Local Government Relations in Scandinavia

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As prefectoral systems are generally regarded to be systems that underpin and serve as the basis for centralization, this article examines how they have developed and how they work, and why they are still considered necessary in decentralized Scandinavia. The article finds that the prefect’s authority towards the municipalities varies in Scandinavia. The Norwegian and Swedish prefectures hold rather powerful roles, while the Danish ones do not. The article suggests that this may have something to do with the need for an institution that brings about cohesion and coordination. Prefectoral systems are basically pragmatic solutions to the problem of enforcing national standards and common values across regions and municipalities, but their role may vary with institutional conditions created by local government reforms. The article further suggests that the authority of the prefecture varies with the character of central-local relations, and that it is vulnerable to changes in dominant political goals and values.

Introduction

Territorial and functional differentiation has produced decision systems where problems are solved in small sub-systems, wherein separate parts deal with limited tasks and hold different information, resources and interests. Governments are, however, continually confronted with tasks where both problems and solutions tend to cut across the boundaries of separate authorities and functional jurisdictions (Hanf & Scharpf 1978). We find that the interdependence of problems is increasing worldwide as the institutional provision of common goods must be increasingy organized across national borders, levels of government and sectors, and in collaboration with public and private actors (Héritier 2002, 1). The need for institutions that ensure cohesion and some kind of standardization and coordination, both internationally and within modern states, appears crucial. As there has been an overall tendency in recent years towards decentralization in the form of devolution of power and responsibilities from the national level to the local level, an institutional response seems quite a challenge. Our intention is to examine how this challenge is dealt with in Scandinavia.

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