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EU and the Sub-national Government of Finland: Half-shut Windows of Opportunities

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Summary

Author begins with a delineation of the Finnish system and thereafter moves on to analyze the dynamics of the system. The main research task is to assess the status of the regional councils in relation to the prevailing organizational structure. Although Finland has during the centuries divided into distinct regions these have not been used as a basis for either political or administrative structure. However, with the EU membership in 1995 the sub-national arena began to change, albeit within the limits of the prevailing organizational structure. The impact of the EU on the Finnish sub-national governance is considerable, but the impact intermingles with a number of domestic factors. Author is concluding that the tradition of sub-national governance in Finland is relatively weak. Therefore, the regions were more cultural entities than politico-administrative actors *per se*.

Key words: sub-national governance in Finland, European Union, regionalization



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Introduction

Finland is a unitary state. In comparison with the other Scandinavian states the Finnish model is almost purely a two-level one: the state and the local governments, numbering 430 (Sandberg, 2005). The regional level has also existed as both a historical and an administrative phenomenon. The first

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one refers to cultural areas often characterized by distinct dialects, and traditions. Thus when speaking about the people the regions, they come from, is a common nominator. The latter, the administrative viewpoint refers to provinces, which were originally established in the 17th century in order to strengthen the king's and the administrative apparatuses' power. The provinces have been larger than regions and in mid 1990's were reformed to include only five, the Southern, Western, Eastern, Oulu and Lappi province, which marks a final difference with regional level administration. Provinces have not been the only form of state administration expanding its organization on the sub-national level. A number of ministries have also established regional units, which, as provinces, do not necessarily correspond with regional borders. These agencies will be examined more closely in the later parts of this article.

In sum, although Finland has during the centuries divided into distinct regions these have not been used as a basis for either political or administrative structure. About the only exception in this were the regional associations of local governments, which were dealing with regional level planning. However, with the EU membership in 1995 the sub-national arena began to change, albeit within the limits of the prevailing organizational structure. The newcomer, who in the following will be in the main focus, is the *regional council* (hereafter RC). The term newcomer exaggerates some what the development, because regional councils were created by integrating the planning departments of the provincial government with the above mentioned regional planning associations. The reform was made already in 1993, i.e. prior to the membership, and the explicit purpose was to prepare for the implementation of the EU structural fund programs (Haveri, 1997).

Did this organizational change imply that regional councils, which prior to early 1990's did not play a remarkable role in the Finnish political (nor administrative) life, suddenly symbolized the emergence of regions as full-fledged actors and arenas? Such expectations existed but as we shall see, did not fully realize in practice. The question of the impact of EU on sub-national government has strongly been on the research agenda for the last years. The explanations have moved from simple to more fine-tuned models of Europeanization, and all researchers seem to agree that the impact is dependent on both the EU and on the national characteristics. Bache and Jones (2000) argue that whether the regions become stronger depends on the framework established at the EU level, on partnership principle in particular, on the degree to which regions are able to take advantage of new opportunity structures, and thirdly, on the territorial structure of the state, i.e. the relationship between the centre and the different peripheries (see also John 2000, Kettunen & Kungla 2005). Europeanization can also evolve in a more subtle and indirect way. Knill and Lehmkuhl (2001) for example argue that integration may trigger domestic change by altering the beliefs and expectations

of domestic actors, and serve as a point of reference for reform-minded domestic actors and provide additional legitimacy for the reforms at the national level.

The following chapter begins with a delineation of the Finnish system and thereafter moves on to analyze the dynamics of the system. The main research task is to assess the status of the regional councils in relation to the prevailing organizational structure.

The sub-national system of Finland – a critical assessment

The sub-national level has been poorly developed in Finland. Unlike Sweden and Denmark, Finland has never had elected regional assemblies. Instead the local governments have developed organs in the areas of health care, vocational education, trash collection etc. (Kettunen, 2006). These organs usually have a political, decision-making body, but the members are nominated by the municipal assemblies, and not by the electorate. These organs are usually responsible for particular policies and a typical municipality can be a member in tens of joint efforts, ranging from bilateral agreements to large ones (university hospitals etc.)

Compared to the European models of central-local-government arrangements, the Scandinavian welfare states have traditionally been characterized by strong local governments, which provide a wide range of services. Municipalities in the Finnish system are autonomous but in effect implement national programs and in this sense have only a little say. Their discretion is circumscribed by budgetary constraints and legislative guidance. Municipalities are in principle responsible for their economy but in cases of large deficits, the state can either submit economic assistance or propose more radical measures, in the last case the amalgamation of individual municipalities with other ones. In spring 2006 the Ministry of the Interior has urged local governments to seriously consider amalgamations and either delegate responsibility for the welfare services to the upper level, or integrate into larger units, which are seen as more viable in terms of economy.

The regional councils established in 1993 marked a difference to the traditional two-level system. Formally the regional councils are based on the will of local governments, and are close to other forms of joint municipal organizations, and their decision-makers are members of the local assemblies. But in practice the regional councils have also formal tasks based on legislation and can act “above” the member municipalities. The RCs are mainly financed by the member municipalities. The regional councils were not meant to challenge the local governments, not taking any of their tasks, but aiming at pushing forward a regional will. In this sense the establishment could be seen as a move towards a stronger sub-national level.

Secondly, a more concrete reason behind the establishment of regional councils was a need to have a regional body which would be in charge of the EU structural fund programs. In this latter task there is, however, a rival organizational arrangement, namely the state regional agencies. When Finland joined the EU in 1995 and began to negotiate about the share of Structural Fund (SF) finance, it became clear that it was not possible to concentrate the administrative responsibility to one ministry only. In stead, in total eight ministries became involved in the implementation of the SF programs, each responsible for one share of the appropriations. This fragmentation is also reflected on the regional level so that although the RC is responsible for coordinating regional development, the regional agencies of the state are in charge of most of the resources.

The main players besides the RCs in the field were to be the regional agencies of ministries, which in the mid 1990's were concentrated under the title of Employment and Economic Development Center, which includes agencies of the ministries of Trade and Industry, Employment, and Agriculture. In addition there are regional agencies of the ministries of Environment and Education; the latter integrated to the Provincial governments. In addition, some pilot programs are guided by the ministries rather than regions. In other words, regional councils are not entitled to coordinate all regional activities, but are at times challenged by state departments, large cities, universities and so aiming at affecting the regional development too. The Finnish regions are "mosaic" as there are 19 regional councils, 15 EEDC-centers, 20 central hospitals, 17 special care districts, 13 environmental centers, each with their specific borders and responsibilities (Niemi-Iilahti 2002).

In order to coordinate the regional development, regional councils have to co-operate with rather than control the other actors. Besides the above-mentioned state regional actors there are a number of other actors, which potentially can either choose their own targets or discuss these in co-operation with the regional council. These actors include above all the big cities, which with the help of resources larger than the RC's have, may be inclined to "think" of its own benefits, and not the well being of the region. The fact that municipalities are economically independent and dependent on the tax income makes the system competitive and creates potential tensions between the municipalities.

The opportunities of the regional councils to coordinate the development have been improved during the last three to four years. In 2003 the RC's approved for the first time a regional program, to which all regional actors, including the state agencies, were obliged to commit them. A recent evaluation (Uusikylä & Koskela 2006), however, concludes that this commitment does not restrict the same agencies to even stronger commit themselves to the goals of their own ministries. Regional councils can invite the other ac-

tors to plan the regional program and to discuss the usage of funds. But, regional councils cannot tell the other actors how they ought to set targets or select projects. The basic weakness was that though responsible for the coordination, regional councils were not given the right to guide how the structural fund appropriations were to be used. Although in the planning phase the actors can agree how to set the goals for regional development, the day-to-day activities, in effect the selection and finance of projects in the SF-program is to a large extent on the responsibility of each actor, not the regional councils. For example the region of South-Western Finland has for the period of 2000-2006 several hundreds of million euros out of which the regional council uses only some 17 million euros.

The responsibilities of the regional councils cover 1) physical planning (land usage), 2) acting as the local authority for EU structural fund programs and finally 3) interest mediation. Especially the second and third tasks include and demand co-operation with other actors, both horizontally and vertically. Horizontally the co-operation mainly deals with the above mentioned state agencies, and mainly in case of EU structural fund programs. A particular form of horizontal cooperation takes place with other regions. The SF programs in Finland are focused on larger areas than regions: the priority 2 programs are for western and southern Finland. Thus there is a good reason to act together for the benefit of say southern Finland. In practice, however, the home region is the main arena of activities. Vertically co-operation is required both upwards with the ministries, and downwards with local level actors.

Besides the planning of land usage which is not relevant in this analysis, the two remaining tasks can be seen to differ from each other. The RC's role in relation to structural fund programs includes both being in charge of its own share of appropriations (directed from the ministry of the Interior) and with the help of the program and implementation of the program to affect the choices of the other actors so that these would serve the best of the region. The third tasks, outside relations, forms an additional challenge: it does not require same kind of power to coordinate the choices of other actors, but more so promoting the regional interests and aiming in finding common benefits.

In brief, the Finnish regional actor, the regional council, is formally relatively weak, suffering from the tension between the overall responsibility for coordination and the lack of power (resources) to fulfill that task. As pinpointed upon regional councils cannot oblige the other actors to follow the regional program, but with co-operation they can come fairly long also. At times, when the state regional agencies, or ministries at the national level make decisions that do not support the regional will, this reveals that the final word in the Finnish system is at the national level. The Finnish regional

scene has been called fragmented one: there are a number of actors financed and responsible for a variety of authorities. Regional councils are not in a position to coordinate all these actors.

The division of labor between the different regional actors has been under various evaluations in the recent years. Usually it has been considered to need reforming, Riepula (2002) for example points to the lack of coordination, fragmentation, lack of responsibility and democratic linkage. For him the establishment of regional councils is a mere smoke screen to hide the weak democratic basis of Finnish regional governance. He also pointed to the fact that the reforms of state regional administration have emphasized performance and delegation and thus diminished the power of the national parliament to steer public policy making.

At the same time we can pinpoint to the possibilities of the regional councils to with the tools of co-operation and interplay to try to coordinate the development. A working plan for the following year, a list of most prioritized projects can become reality, or can be changed by, say a decision by a ministry to direct the resources somewhere else. Similarly, regional councils can aim at pushing the other regional actors, cities, rural municipalities, universities, and so, to the same direction and thus overcome the potential egoistic tensions between the various actors. In brief the tasks of the regional councils can be narrower or broader, depending on how it co-operates with the other regional partners. But, an alternative way to delineate the situation is to argue that regional councils are responsible for inviting the other partners to the same table. These can be the state agencies, but also big cities and so.

The main tasks then become co-operation with other regional actors, fulfilling the task of coordination, taking care of its own share of the projects, and representing the regional interests outside, both nationally and internationally. Which then of the above tasks is most important? One possibility is to analyze the resources used to the different tasks, both appropriations and personnel costs. A second option is to assess the visibility of the activities, i.e. how well is the regional council's activities known by citizens, municipalities, or the state. A third possibility would be to estimate the importance of the activities. Is an euro put in running an office in Brussels more useful than an euro put in supporting, say, local culture production. This line of analysis would, however, be difficult to implement because different actors value different benefits. In the following the analysis moves on to assess the decision-making system of the regional councils, i.e. what are the mechanisms to define and decide on the regional interests.

But how is it in practice, can the regional councils in real terms coordinate and guide? Some evaluators say yes, the regional program and the regional budgets are central documents in regional planning and implementa-

tion. The program is approved by the regional assembly and the working plan by the executive and thus there are not really other actors looking beyond administrative boarders. Yet another group of evaluators say that no, the regional councils do not have the capacity to guide the others, and hence would like to take the role further. The limited role also means that even if there were interesting discussions going on, this arena is not the sole represent of the region.

As some proposals suggest, direct elections might give the regional councils the additional legitimacy and status to use more the formal powers. This however is a highly political question. Out of the main parties only the center (with its roots in the countryside) would favor this, while the more urban social-democrats and the conservatives favor the present system of two levels.

The decision-making system of regional councils

The core of the regional councils is the bureaucracy. Compared to the provinces, state regional agencies, and the large cities, the amount of administrative staff is relatively modest. However, their permanent position and their often long term perspective give additional resources when dealing with regional issues. The formal decision-making organs of regional councils are political ones, both an assembly and an executive organ. The members to neither of these are elected by the citizens, but nominated by the municipal assemblies. In addition to the representation of member local governments the assemblies reflect the political balance in the region. The regional executive is a smaller organ and compared to the only twice a year meeting assembly, is more dealing with the daily tasks. In addition to these two, the regional councils have smaller working groups, which are, above all, politically representative. In connection to the SF programs the group of involved organizations is, however, larger. This reflects the EU criteria of partnership, inviting both the actors, which finance projects, and the social partners in the decision-making.

In practice, it seems that the indirectly elected organs do not play the decisive role. The assembly only gathers two times a year and it is much more an arena for discussing general issues of the region than the programs. The members represent their home municipalities and their election is based on political considerations, i.e. the biggest parties can choose firstly which seats they take amongst the number of joint effort organs the members are selected to. The executive is certainly more central, but even its workload is a light one compared to the executives of the local governments. The task of the executive is to foresee the regional interest.

The strongest actor in implementing regional programs and running the Structural Fund programs is the bureaucracy. This is where the projects are

selected, evaluated and monitored. This is also where the contacts usually take place over to the states regional agencies. In some cities these agencies can also be located in the same building as the regional council. At the same time it seems that once the program is prepared and the routine of distributing money to the projects begins, there is a fairly clear division of labor between the various actors.

A key actor when talking about the Structural funds is the Regional management committee (RMC). The members are selected so that they represent the financing partners, the local governments and the social partners. The latter can represent trade-unions, business associations and so forth. In the region of Turku for example the social partners represent especially organizations for trade-unions and local business. In addition there are some members with the status of expert who represent for example universities. The regional management committee also has boards for specific purposes.

When one evaluates the role of the RMC it is important to notice some points. Firstly, the RMC summons only every two months and does not take care of running the programs. Secondly, and connected to the previous point, RMCs do not approve every project application, but only the larger ones. The members of the committee, in this case the ones representing organizations which run the program, inform the council of the financed projects, after it has already made the decision. This also diminishes the role played by the regional management committee, which after all has members also representing political parties and social partners. These seem however be not the arenas for principal questions nor debating, but the aim is more to provide information what each and very actor has conducted independently. In one evaluation of the regional management committees (Valle, 2002) the social partners were found to have less contacts than the bureaucrats and also that the important working groups of the committee were almost solely dominated by bureaucrats. However, it is up to the regional council to decide what kind of institutional arrangements the committee takes and thus direct more or less power to the social partners and local government politicians. The purpose of the committee is thus rather to exchange information than discuss how to select projects. However, information of this kind, especially when distributed further by the social partners, can contribute to better understanding of the activities and to potential new applications as well.

In sum, the tasks of the RC in relation to structural fund programs are twofold. For the first it has to take care of its own share of projects. The profile of these is usually development, tourism, the information society, i.e. different from the more specific projects of the state regional agencies. Secondly, RC has to coordinate the other actors, is in charge of the regional program. In this the challenge is to ascertain that the other actors commit themselves to the plan and act accordingly.

Besides the structural funds, RC's can engage themselves in many other activities. The following chapter goes deeper into this area.

Regional Councils and the EU

Regional councils can, even with the limited power, engage in a number of activities outside the home region. In the Finnish regions this is still fairly modest, compared to the big European regions, but still represents an important part in their activities. We can delineate this dynamic and complex network in the following manner:

1. Regional actors are formally represented in the COR
2. Regions have also established bureaus in Brussels
3. Regions can engage in bilateral activities

The COR has 9 + 9 Finnish members. These are selected by the Central Association of the Municipalities, and proposed by the Ministry of the Interior to the Government, which then presents the candidates to the Council of Ministers. The members are proposed by regional councils. There are number of criteria: they have to be elected or responsible for elected organs, and both the political and regional considerations are applied. As the members are not full time away from their home region the membership offers good opportunities to mediate information from the COR to the region and even to the opposite direction.

The Brussels offices of Finnish regions number at current eight and thus every region has not its own office. It is typical that the background organizations of these offices differ. The two big ones, Helsinki and Turku, have a similar structure: the offices are supported by three major actors, the city, the regional council and the university. In practice the city (of Helsinki, Turku) is the caretaker of the office and the two others pay for the time they benefit. Other possibilities are that the office is not run by individual region but several. Perhaps the most special arrangement is the one where the South-Eastern Kymenlaakso region is in partnership with the Russian Karelia region.

The activities of the offices are fairly similar to each other. They have to on one hand get information from the EU and on the other hand spread information from the regions to the EU. The first task resembles much the activities of any lobby group. It is crucial to be in the right information events and also know what relevant processes are going on. Getting links to the Commission is however always a challenge. The processes get easier to target once they move on to the Parliament and become public. The regions may have particular interests, such as environment or biotechnology, if these are relevant for the region. One form of activity is to arrange visit from the

home region to Brussels and as for example the office of Turku does, arrange a larger event which brings together persons from the EU and the region. The offices however have relatively limited resources. For example the Turku office has one permanent person and two student trainees. It is understandable that one person cannot do very much. The profile of the offices, and in general of the international activities, is a practical one. The offices aim at representing the regional business, including research, and open up both new opportunities for export and raise interest amongst potential investors to the home region.

The bilateral relations can be numerous, but in effect they are not financed very much. The city of Turku for example has contacts, and contracts, with regions in Germany, France and Poland. The activities can range from one or two event, visits, fairs during the year to more lively interaction.

All together the relationships outside the region can be argued to have two major purposes. The first one is to find information from the EU which in one way or another would benefit the region. This kind of activity can be difficult to measure in terms of results. It can be that some research ideas, research applications, or other kinds of plans emerge on the basis of such information. But this is hard to trace. The other type of activity, to promote the region outside is more visible. But still, from the viewpoint of results this can be also difficult to estimate. One can have tens of events in numerous countries but this depends on the actors, enterprises etc. themselves, whether they really take contact.

Regions can also establish links with other regions. One factor encouraging the regions to do this is the fact that the structural fund programs are on this level, one for southern Finland and one for western Finland.

Finally, a more stable form of activity is the various EU programs which aim at cross-border activities. Inter-Reg.-programs offer opportunities to well-resourced activities and the administration of these programs bring visibility and administrative work to the regional councils.

EU and the change of regional development

The 1995 membership was in many ways important for the Finnish politico-administrative system, not least for the regional level. The civil service has over the last ten years used to interact with the EU officials, and particular procedures have been developed to bring in the political process new elements from the EU.

Whereas the development at the national level has been swift the regional and local levels have been affected more in a limited way. However, the implementation of regional policy as such represents a new approach in many

respects. After all, the requirements of partnership, programmatic planning and frequent evaluation of performance reflect values which are advocated even more generally. How these aims realize in practice is another question requiring empirical analysis. The above observations suggest that programmatic approach can suffer when the actors have to commit themselves both horizontally and vertically. The principle of partnership is followed both in the decision-making system and requiring the projects to build on the commitment of several actors. At the same time we can point to the relatively high level of division of labor in, say, the regional management committee, and on the regional level in general. The Finnish development corresponds to large extent to the observations of Halkier (Halkier, 2001.: 335) concerning Denmark: Danish regional policy has been transformed from a typical example of traditional central government intervention in the name of inter-regional equity to a version of the new multi-level paradigm in which promotion of indigenous growth and competitiveness is the shared goal and regional actors play a prominent role within a broad regulatory framework.

The biggest change has however probably been outside the regional councils in the project environment. It seems that the resources have created an army of persons, who know the EU jargon, know how to make a good application and are masters in networking. There have even been doubts that the existing organizations haunt for new projects merely to survive (Haveri, 1997). Another negative element is the project exhaustion, i.e. that the strict requirement for the partners to participate the expenses of the projects is not always easy to fulfill.

Programmatic approach is also a new element at the national level. The four policy programs of the government reflect the similar kind of approach (with goals, performance indicators, partnership) which has been applied at the regional level for the last ten years. A recent evaluation (Uusikylä & Koskela, 2006) points to the fact that program goals tend to be too vague and similar in different regions. Therefore, they urge the regional actors, the councils in particular, to engage in proactive and innovative planning.

Conclusions

The principal question in the above analysis has been the role of the regional council within the Finnish sub-national system. Our starting point was that the 1993 established Regional Councils were given the task to represent the regional level and coordinate its' activities. If this would be the case, we could argue that the EU membership has played an important role in rearranging the Finnish sub-national government. In the closer analysis, however, it has been shown that Regional councils have not been able to reach a position in which they could be the sole representatives and coordinators of

the regional will and interests. This, as the analysis suggests, is due to a number of factors the most important being the lack of resources and thus dependence on the other actors.

How strong is the regional council as an actor? This question can be approached from different angles. Firstly we can point to the limited scope of actions regional councils are responsible for. Although in principle in charge for the regional development and coordination, regional councils are dependent on the benevolence of other actors, the big cities, state agencies, university and other research institutes and so forth.

The implementation of regional programs is made more difficult because of the states budgetary politics. The management by results approach of the ministries and the resource distribution takes place too much according to narrow administrative borders and thus the opportunities to coordination are less. There is no common idea of regional development. The regional program has remained isolated from other types of programs

At the same time a number of other developments speak for the more important role of the regional councils. They can bring the regional actors together, emphasize the regional interests and in many ways de facto coordinate the activities. This also means that regions differ. In sum, the Finnish sub-national level governance has changed with the establishment of regional councils. There is more discussion on the regional interests, more actors, more resources directed to the regional level. These observations indicate a potential long-time evolvement of regional governance.

Still, at the end of the day, it would not be fair to speak of a third level of government, a genuine regional level, in Finland. Already in 2007 onwards the structural fund resources will be smaller for the Southern regions. The Finnish system is a two-level one. Both the state and local levels are extending their arms further, the state downwards to regions and local governments upwards to the regions. If in the long run we may see stronger development towards regional government this would require strong domestic political support (Kettunen & Kungla 2005, Bache & Jones 2000). As Sandberg (2005) points out even the influence of the EU is not a straightforward one. On one hand we can consider phenomena like partnership and the emphasis on regional identity being based on the influence of EU. On the other hand, EU-membership, and the EMU membership, can also be argued to demand economic stability and controllability, and hence the role of the state remains strong. Europe of the regions may remain as a distant goal.

Does EU encourage regionalization? To the extent the member states adapt the principle of partnership. But at the end of the day the national authorities have much to say. In sum, the impact of the EU on the Finnish sub-national governance is considerable, but the impact intermingles with a

number of domestic factors. As the paper pointed out, the tradition of sub-national governance in Finland is relatively weak. The regions were more cultural entities than politico-administrative actors *per se*. Although the latter half of the 1990's witnesses a stronger role for the regions, this institutionalization is to a large degree orchestrated from above and secondly highly dependent on the EU structural funds. Altogether the development suggests that the regions have become stronger as administrative entities but as genuine political organs they do not exist. Thus the key to more regional power is held by the political parties (Eskelinen, 2001) and their incentives to support reforms.

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