

Botolv Helleland

✉ botolv.helleland@iln.uio.no

🆔 <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-6191-284X>

🏠 University of Oslo

🌐 Oslo, Norway

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The Regional and Municipal Reform in Norway: The Naming Processes

Abstract

The paper discusses the choice and treatment of names in connection with the regional reform in Norway. The first stage of the reform was adapted in 2017, implying that the number of counties were to be reduced from 19 to 11, and the number of municipalities from 426 to 358. Following the change of government, a second reform was adapted in 2022 entailing a partial return to the former county structure with 15 counties. The choice of names of the new regions has been central to the political process and created a lot of debate. In the discussion about naming, reference was made to the Act on place names, which has rules about the spelling. Several new names have replaced traditional names such as *Innlandet* ‘the inner part of the country’ for the two former counties of *Hedmark* and *Oppland*. The consideration of inherited names has been set aside several times because local politicians have favored “advertising” names, such as the new county name *Vestland* and the municipal names *Fjord* and *Færder*. It is though likely that most of the new names will be accepted given time. But also, in the event of future changes in the county and municipal structure, there will be room for disagreement when it comes to the naming process.

Keywords

place names, names of regional divisions, name giving, historical place names, place name changes, place name standardisation

1. Introduction

On 8 June 2017, the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) decided by a very scarce majority of 85 to 84 votes that the number of counties (Norw. *fylke*) in Norway should be reduced from 19 to 11. The new county division came into force on 1 January 2020. However, after the general election in 2021 with a subsequent change of government, it was decided that three of the merged counties should be dissolved and returned to their original status as seven separate counties.

The regional reform of 2017 also implied a reduction of the number of municipalities (Norw. *kommune*) through mergers from 428 to 356. Of these, less than the half were merged on a voluntary basis, while the rest were forcibly merged into nine larger units. Among the people affected by the changes, strong feelings related to identity and democracy arose, and led to emotionally charged statements such as “forced to the knee”, “forced marriage” and “overthrow of local democracy”. The same kind of strife had taken place at the comprehensive municipal reform of 1964 when the number of municipalities had been almost halved. In the following decades, a few more municipalities merged, but only in 2015 did the process begin that would lead to the municipal reform of 2020.

Choosing and determining the names of the merged counties and municipalities also became a major issue. Many compromises were made, but several of the names adapted still caused dissatisfaction and discord.

Nine of the eleven counties were given new or partly new names. As to the municipalities, most of the restructured ones kept one of the existing (former) names. A handful of the 72 merged municipalities were given new names.

2. Divisional and district names in a historical context

The secular administrative division of Norway consists of three main secular levels: state, county, and municipality. The judicial division consists likewise of three levels: Supreme court, court of appeal, and district court. The

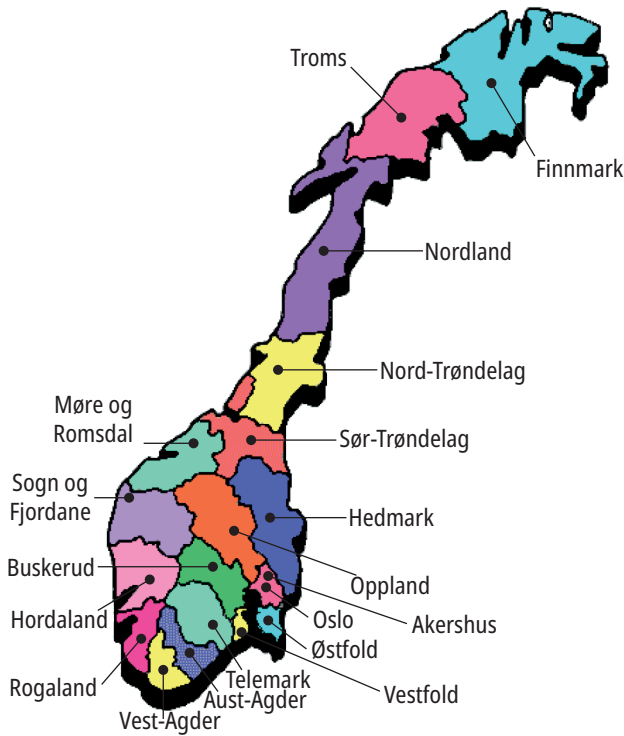
three clerical divisions consist of diocese, rural deanery, and parish. These different administrative levels are partly based on counties and municipalities, but mostly have their own boundaries. In addition, there are quite a few regional divisions with varying extent and function, such as health districts and various inter-municipal areas in public administration. A typical feature of the names of newer administrative and economical divisions are direction designations, e.g., *Helse Sør-Øst* ‘Health southeast’.

Most administrative and clerical units have continued old, inherited district or settlement names, which constitute a valuable cultural and linguistic heritage (cf. Falk & Hægstad, 1915, 1916; Indrebø, 1927; Helleland, 2005). However, this aspect was not given priority at the regional reform. For instance, when the two counties of *Hedmark* and *Oppland* merged, the new unit was given the name *Innlandet* ‘the inner part of the country’, even though it quite well corresponded to the medieval area named *Upplond* (pl. of *land* n., here meaning ‘the upper districts’).

The term *fylke*, Old Norse *fylki* n. (derived from *folk* ‘people’, cf. Indrebø, 1931) had already been in use in Norse times, referring to districts of various size but was replaced during the Danish period by *len* and thereafter by *amt* (1671).¹ Then in 1918, as part of the restoration, *amt* was replaced by *fylke* (see Helleland, 2005). From this year until the regional reform of 2020, the country consisted of 19 counties, including the city county of Oslo (Map 1). The town of Bergen had also county status from 1919 until 1972.

The newer term *region* has been widely used for the new divisions in the planning phase. However, the inherited term *fylke* (sometimes *storfylke* ‘large county’) is likely to be kept. In the Middle Ages the term *skipreide* (Old Norse *skipreiði*) was used for an area that could provide a ship crew in case of war (Hovda, 1978). Some of the names of the medieval *skipreide* were later continued as names of district courts.

¹ After the introduction of the «absolute» monarchy in Denmark-Norway (1660) the previous division into *len* and *sysse*l was replaced by 12 *amt* (counties) in 1671. Later, the number of counties increased through a reorganization of the various parts of the country, and the term *fylke* was introduced (see survey of the naming chronology in Helleland, 2005). In 1919 Norway consisted of 18 «rural» counties, and two «city» counties: Christiania (Kristiania 1877–1924), in 1924 replaced by the historical name *Oslo*, and Bergen (until 1972 when it was integrated in the county of Hordaland).



Map 1. Boundaries and names of the 19 counties before the regional reform of 2020

Source: Eri: <https://eri.no/kart/>

Throughout history, many changes have taken place in the county and municipal structure in Norway in terms of numbers, extent, and names. Typical of the change in 1918 was the fact that all the 19 counties regained their historical names (Falk & Hægstad, 1915, 1916). The diocese structure is partly built on the historical county (*len*) division, partly given “modernized” Old Norse names like *Björgvin*, cf. Old Norse *Björgvin* and *Nidaros*, Old Norse *Niðaróss* (see also below).

The number of municipalities (formerly *herad* ‘rural district’ and *by* ‘town, urban district’) has also varied greatly over the years. In 1957, the country was divided into 744 municipalities, which in 1964 was reduced to 454. In the following years, the number of municipalities was further reduced to 428. Where a former rural municipality merged with an urban

one, the name of the last one usually became the name of the new municipality. In a couple of cases, both old names were used after the merger, such as *Nore og Uvdal* (Nore and Uvdal) in the county of Buskerud. Only in one case was a new name constructed, based on two former municipal names; thus, *Holtålen* became the new name of the merged municipalities of *Haldalen* and *Ålen* in Sør-Trøndelag.

After several years of political discussions, a narrow majority of the Parliament voted in 2018 in favour of the regional reform, which meant that the number of regions (counties) from 1 January 2020 was to be reduced from 19 to 11. In parallel with the regional reform, the government – also based on a relatively narrow majority vote in the Parliament – aimed to reduce the number of municipalities from 428 to 356.

3. Historical vs. modern names

Most traditional divisional names, both regional and local ones, are based on inherited place names rooted in the Middle Ages or in the pre-Christian period. County names such as *Hordaland* and *Ryfylke* and district names such as *Ringerike* and *Romerike* reflect different ethnic groups who settled in those areas in ancient times. The names of the 11 dioceses have maintained the old names in modernized forms, such as *Hålogaland* (Old Norse *Hálogaland*), *Nidaros* (Old Norse *Niðaróss*), *Björgvin* (Old Norse *Björgvin*), *Tunsberg* (Old Norse *Túnsberg*).

Most municipal names are old parish names and farm names with roots in the Middle Ages or pre-Christian times and belong to the most valuable linguistic and cultural heritage of the nation, a point that is often emphasized in public debate. These values are also laid down in the Norwegian Place name Act of 1990. Implicitly it means that inherited names should as far as possible be continued, even if the new entity is extended or diminished. However, this view was not always considered. New names like the county name *Vestland* and the municipality names *Fjord* and *Færder* (the last one with primary reference to a small group of islands at the mouth of Oslofjorden) were no doubt chosen due to their expected branding effect.



Map 2. Boundaries and names of the 11 dioceses in Norway

Source: The Norwegian Church, <https://www.kirken.no/nb-NO/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/bispedommerad/bispedommene/>

When the two municipalities *Norddal* and *Stordal* in Western Norway merged they agreed on *Fjord* as the name of the new entity (and not *Dal* which would be linguistically more logical). There is reason to believe that “fjord” was preferred because of its seaside associations and thus perhaps sounding more attractive than *Dal* “valley”. In a historical perspective, the choice should be either *Norddal* or *Stordal* (or both, like the double name *Nore og Uvdal* above).

At the 2020 reform, three of the original 18 counties continued without any change as to their extent and have retained their former names: *Rogaland*, *Møre og Romsdal* and *Nordland*. For two of the newly merged counties, the choice of name was obvious: *Agder* was taken as the name of the former *Aust-Agder* and *Vest-Agder*. For the southern part of Agder, *Sørlandet* has since approximately 1900 functioned as an administratively informal region, but that name could not cope with the inherited name *Agder*. The former counties of *Nord-Trøndelag* and *Sør-Trøndelag* also merged seamlessly into *Trøndelag*. Two of the new regions were also given double names: Since there is no old area or district name that fits, *Finnmark og Troms* and *Vestfold og Telemark*

were chosen for the respective new extended regions. By using double names, several of the old names could be passed on, although it might seem a bit impractical using such long name phrases.

4. Act on place names

Norway has had, since 1990, a detailed law on place names, which, among other things, rules that the spelling of place names must be in accordance with the spelling rules of Norwegian, and further that place names must be handled as part of the country's cultural heritage. The law also implies that state, county-based and municipal agencies are required to consult the Language Council before deciding upon a place name. It would then be reasonable that the Language Council gets involved in the naming process at the same time as the planning of the new geographical units starts. However, this was not done in connection with the regional reform. Only when the names had gained ground with local politicians and support in the media the Language Council was consulted. At this stage of the process, it was too late to introduce alternatives. Consequently, very few of the Language Council's comments and suggestions of alternative names or name forms were followed up.

5. New regions with new names: *Vestland, Viken, Innlandet*

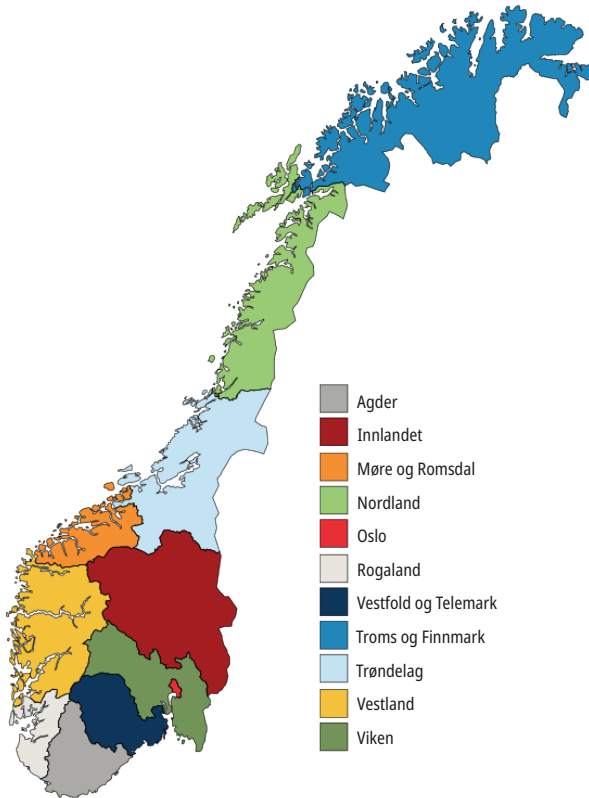
5.1. Vestland

In those cases where the existing county names came in as part of the name of the new region, the discussion quickly subsided. On the other hand, both before as well as after the name decisions, there was a lot of controversy about the names *Vestland*, *Viken* and *Innlandet*. *Vestland* includes the two former counties of *Hordaland* and *Sogn og Fjordane*. These two names cover less than half

of the area historically referred to as *Vestlandet*. The two counties Rogaland and Møre og Romsdal traditionally belong to *Vestlandet* as well. In the Middle Ages, *Vestlandet* also included Agder. So, taking out the central part of the former region of *Vestlandet* and giving it the name *Vestland* (leaving out the definite article *-et*) obviously constitutes a practical and historical disadvantage. Among those who objected to the name *Vestland* were the people from the tourism business. Commercial and cultural organisations also supported the protests. It was claimed that the name *Vestlandet* has a long tradition for the area comprising all four former counties, and that it would be a theft to take *Vestland* only for two of them, even in its indefinite form. A literary reference to the name form *Vestland* could be found by locals in the popular poem and song “Å Vestland, Vestland” by Tore Ørjasæter, published in 1910 (translated into English by the author of this article):

O Vestland, Vestland! When I see your mightiness,
with rising mountains, fjords, and narrow bays,
it friendly meets me large and wild,
and welcomes me at home again.

In its consultation statement, the Language Council (Språkrådet) pointed out that there were good alternatives to *Vestland*. One alternative was the historical name *Bjørgvin*, derived from the Old Norse *Bjørgvin* (now Bergen), which was already used as a name of a diocese. The name *Bergenhus*, referring to an ancient fortress in Bergen, was also mentioned as an alternative, as this name was previously used in *Nordre Bergenhus amt* and *Søndre Bergenhus amt*. The Language Council's preferred name, however, was *Gula* (*fylke*), which is a historically based name for the region in question, used both in the old court system *Gulating*, and as the name of the Court of Appeal in the two earlier counties. The first element reflects an old fjord name, perhaps meaning ‘the windy (fjord)’. Alternatively, *Gul-* may be related to a root meaning ‘cleft’ (NSL, pp. 186f.). The Gula fjord is reshaped fairly in the middle of the new region. The two merged counties of Vestfold og Telemark and Troms and Finnmark kept both their old names as double names.



Map 3. Boundaries and names of the 11 counties according to the regional reform of 2020

Source: Furfur, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nye_fylker_-_regjeringen.no.svg

5.2. Viken

Viken ‘the bay’ is the name of the earlier proposed new region with the former counties of Østfold, Akershus and Buskerud. *Viken* is a literary form of the Old Norse *Víkin* which is the definite form of *vík* f. In earlier times the name was used for Oslofjorden and the land area on both sides of the fjord and southwards as far as Göta älv close to Gothenburg in present Sweden. The inherited dialect pronunciation of the name is *Vika* [vi:ka] but due to Danish-language influence, the form *Viken* gained ground in written as well as in colloquial language and is today continued in several administrative and institutional

contexts. The new large county of *Viken* extends from the Swedish border to the border with Western Norway, i.e., far beyond the natural phenomenon that has motivated the name. Otherwise, the name *Vika* is common in many places around the coast, including a seaside district of Oslo.

One problem with finding a historical name for this region is that it extends over an elongated area with several different district names. The Language Council stated that if one were to take the old name for the Oslofjorden area and northwestwards, it should be used in the modern form *Vika*. There is, however, a general opinion that *Viken* (and even *Vika* with its alternative definite article *a*) is an unfortunate name for the area in question.

5.3. Innlandet

The new county of *Innlandet* ‘the inner part of the country’ comprises the two old inland counties *Oppland* and *Hedmark*. *Innland* has in recent decades been used as a part of the name of various institutions, such as *Innlandet Hospital*, *Innlandet Police District*, *Innlandet University College*. This name is based on the perception that the name immediately provides information about where in the country the region is situated and serves as a contrast to the other county names *Nordland* and *Vestland(et)*, and to the more unofficial name *Sørlandet* (comprising the southern part of Agder). In Norse times, *Upplond* (*lond* is the Old Norse plural form of *land* n.) was used for the larger part of the new county of *Innlandet*. Thus, it would historically be a good idea to introduce the name *Opplanda* for this region (*-landa* is the inherited definite plural form of *land*). But as *Innlandet* had already been used for decades in various contexts, the name *Opplanda* gained little support.

5.4. Agder, Trøndelag, Vestfold og Telemark, Troms og Finnmark

The amalgamated region *Agder* for the previous *Aust-Agder* and *Vest-Agder* counties was adapted without any protest. The same applied to *Trøndelag* for the previous *Sør-Trøndelag* and *Nord-Trøndelag*. Double names such as *Troms og Finnmark* and *Vestfold og Telemark* were kept because no adequate alternatives were at hand. Nonetheless they have their parallel in the existing county name of *Møre og Romsdal* which was given as early as in 1935.

The Saami name for Trøndeleg is *Trööndelage* whereas *Romsa* and *Finnmárku* are Saami names for Troms and Finnmark. The Kven names of the two last counties are *Tromssa* and *Finmarkku*.

6. The modified county reform of 14 June 2022²

Viken was still seen by many as an unsatisfactory unit with an unfortunate name, and after the change of government in 2022 it was decided that this large county should be dissolved, and that the former three counties *Østfold*, *Akershus*, and *Buskerud* should be restored with their respective names from 1 January 2024. The same applies to the amalgamated counties of *Telemark og Vestfold*, and *Troms og Finnmark* which now would get back their previous status as separate counties. This means that the number of counties will increase from 11 to 15. The county status of *Oslo* was never disputed during the reform process.

7. Names of merged municipalities

The municipality reform led to 68 new (merged) municipalities having their names changed. The choice of names was made in the following ways:

- (1) Using the name of the largest urban area within the merged area, most often a town name, such as *Larvik* for the previous *Larvik* and *Lardal*.
- (2) Using an older district name with or without a modifying term, e.g., *Indre Østfold* ‘the inner [part of] Østfold’ (*Østfold* is the name of the restored county in which *Indre Østfold* is situated); *Sunnfjord*, covering a part of the larger district *Sunnfjord* (cf. the adjoining district of *Nordfjord*).

² <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/kommuner-og-regioner/kommunestruktur/fylkesinndelingen-fra-2024/id2922222/>



Map 4. Boundaries and names of the 15 counties that will apply from 1 January 2024

Source: KDD/PLAN, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/tema/kommuner-og-regioner/kommunestruktur/fylkesinndelingen-fra-2024/id2922222/>

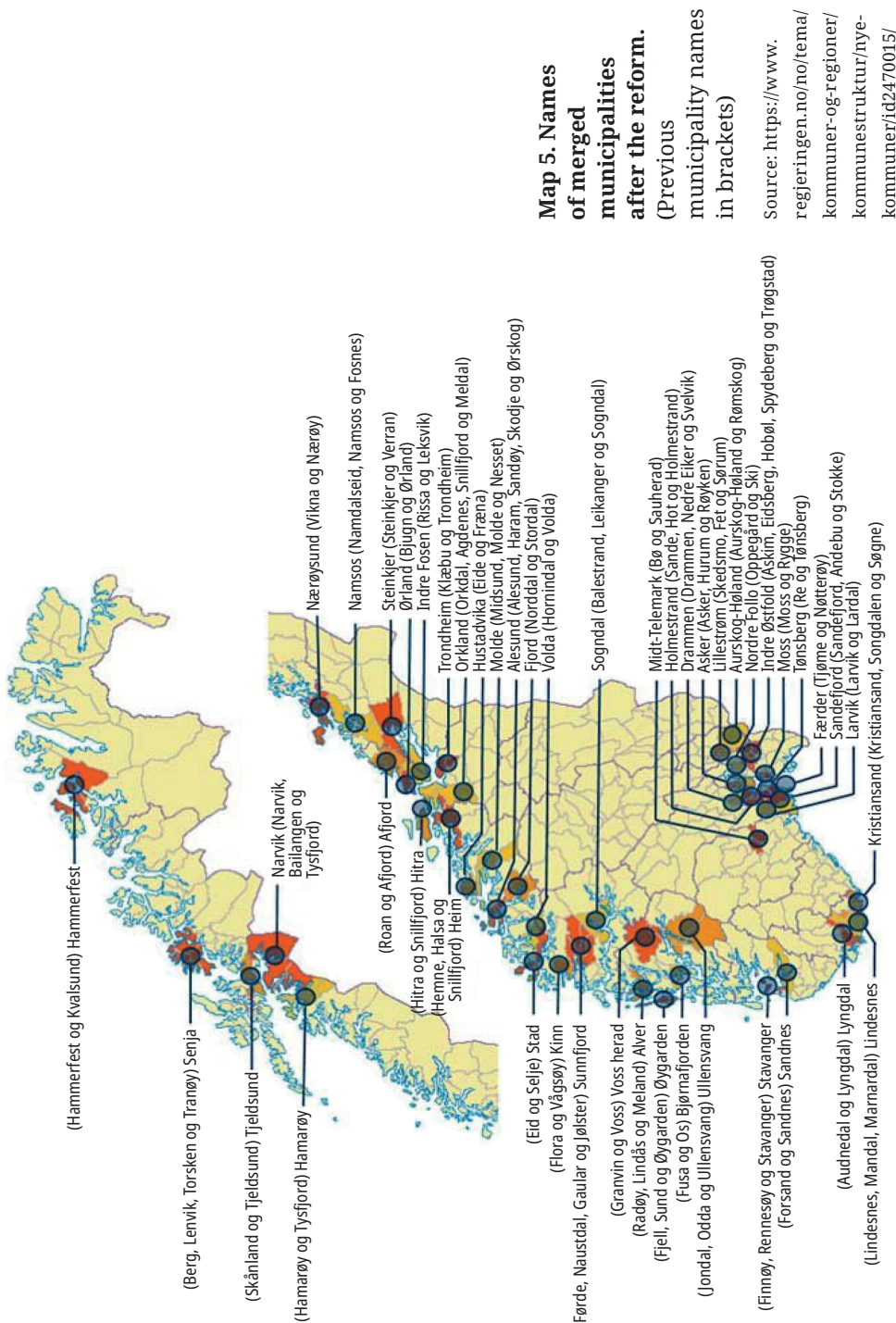
- (3) Using the name of a well-known natural feature within the new municipality: *Færder* (name of a small group of islets), comprising the former *Nøtterøy* and *Tjøme*; *Bjørnafjorden* (the name of a fjord), comprising the former *Fusa* and *Os* municipalities; *Stad* (the name of a promontory into the Norwegian Sea), comprising the former *Eid* and *Selje* municipalities.
- (4) If the same municipality name was used in two different counties before the merger, one of them had to be changed if the counties in question merged: Thus, *Nes* in the former county of Buskerud agreed to adapt *Nesbyen* as its new name whereas *Nes* in the former county of Akershus kept its old name *Nes*. However, since Akershus and Buskerud will be reestablished as separate counties in 2024, this is no longer a problem. Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that *Nesbyen* will not go back to its old name.

8. Ongoing disputes and conclusions

During the introduction of the regional reform, many people in several of the formerly independent municipalities protested the amalgamation into larger municipalities, and actions were taken to dissolve the new units. In some cases, the Government opened a new vote. One example is the merged large municipality and town of Kristiansand, where the much smaller former municipality *Søgne* did not want to be ruled by the new “big brother”. The outcome of this dispute has not yet (September 2023) been set. Similar protest initiatives are found in other merged municipalities.

The program for regional reform points to a new orientation both in terms of terminology and function of names. However, new structures and new functions can lead to traditional names coming under pressure and falling out of use. Hopefully most of the inherited names in question will survive in new functions. According to the regulations of the Act on place names, the Language Council should be consulted before the relevant authorities officially approve the names.

The choice of names, however, is left to local people and municipal authorities. This is a weak point of the law, as people in general evaluate the names based on their modern usage, promoted by social media, and not so much on



their linguistic and cultural value. From a linguistic and cultural point of view, there would be much to gain if the Language Council were not only consulted but also listened to before the names of the new units were determined.

As mentioned, the regional reform was adapted by a very narrow majority. The general election in 2021 led to a change of government, and the programme of the new government includes commitment to reconsider some aspects of the regional reform, including the dissolution of *Troms and Finnmark*, *Vestfold og Telemark*, and *Viken* in line with the wishes of the locals. The present government has set 1 January 2024 as date for the restoration of these three merged counties.

The government's attitude to the choice of names is that the names should be functional and have local support. Several of the names had already been in use before the regional reform was adapted. However, there were many reactions against some of them, both from the public and cultural authorities.

As to *Viken*, the protests were directed against the delimitation of the new region as well as against the name itself. As mentioned above, the new non-traditional *Vestland* collides with the long established *Vestlandet*. And *Innlandet* – which could just as soon have got the name *Østlandet* or *Nord-Østlandet* – also sounds both ahistorical and diffuse.

There is little reason to believe that the changes in Norway's regional system, which were adapted in 2017 with a narrow majority and implemented in 2020, and further modified in 2022, will be permanent. Structural changes are constantly taking place in society and new names are gaining ground. Hopefully, most of the old division and municipality names will live on, even if the divisions they are used for may change over time.

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