

## **Diversity within regions, a strength or weakness for regional development? The case of West Sweden**

Author: Magnus Lindh, Political Science, Karlstad University, Sweden

Unfortunately, due to late interviews, I will not be able to present a full paper in due time. However, for the conference my paper and presentation will be finished. In relation to the abstract that was sent in earlier (see below), the argument in the paper will be that after the closure of the joint regional European office in Brussels, West Sweden, we witness an ongoing process in the western part of Sweden that could be conceptualized as a 'reconfigured Europeanisation', i.e. the three different regions within West Sweden are choosing different paths of Europeanisation as a response to the demand and challenges from EU policy-making in order to spur regional growth. Region Värmland are interestingly developing their contacts with Norway and the Oslo office, a process that I conceptualize as 'adjacent Europeanisation'. Region Halland are choosing a more inward looking strategy, with rather weak ties to EU policy-making, which I conceptualize as 'reluctant Europeanisation'. In contrast, in the biggest and strongest region in western part of Sweden, West Götaland Region there are a greater diversity how to work together in EU-related issues, which I conceptualize as 'differentiated Europeanisation'. This divergent paths of how to handle EU-affairs in order to promote regional growth will be elaborated further in the paper.

Magnus Lindh

### **The abstract; related to the theme: Territorial Governance and Regional Leadership**

Taking the central argument for the conference, that a 'variety of economic activities as well as divergent local cultures within the region is a source of regional strength and resilience', as its departure; and building upon the assumption that 'top-down' assessments of a supranational European Union must be balanced and linked to 'bottom-up' assessments of how such development are perceived by regional policymakers, institutions and elites, this paper focus on how the well-known asymmetry and variation of how regional actors in Europe handle EU-affairs are deconstructing and reconfiguring the institutional linkages between the regional and supranational level in the case of West Sweden.

Regional governance has become an important vehicle to drive and implement European and national policy strategies. Most recently, the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth and the research and innovation strategy for smart specialisation highlight the potential of regional governance on economic development and social innovation. For this discussion, it is important to recognize that the EU, by now attempting a more integrated and thematic approach to deliver and implement a growth strategy. This approach embarks upon a more integrated and holistic way of thinking that provide for a 'thicker' regional agenda for regional policymakers to act and react to. In particular, since 2010, the various EU institutions, led by the European Commission, have increasingly stressed, and sought to strengthen linkages between key policy remits and frameworks at its disposal and thus to 'thicken' the top down pressures being downloaded into the sphere of regions and regional policymakers. The question is

to what extent regions are able to unfold the potential for growth, structural change, skills development, research and innovation in this system of multilevel governance.

As the European Union promotes the coordination and connection among regional actors, this paper looks at the case of how the West Sweden Regional Office in Brussels - that have served as an institutional link between the EU and local and regional actors in the Western parts of Sweden since 1992 - are closing down as a consequence of internal rivalries among the 72 members' on how to handle issues of regional development in the context of a multilevel governance system.

This paper argues that an asymmetric process of Europeanisation - in terms of vertical and horizontal action - among local and regional actors has led to a reconsideration of their engagements in a joint regional office in Brussels. A greater diversity of preferences triggers a bottom-up reconfiguration of regional capacities favouring new structures on a smaller scale.

Theoretically, this paper builds upon two strands of literature. First the concept of 'Region Action', that focuses on regional actors as agents for change. To put it simple, 'regional action' refers to those consciously; rationally-taken political measures by regional policymakers that seek to transmit and promote regional interests in an EU-related framework. Second, in order to grasp the dynamic and asymmetrical picture of regional action in Europe we need analytical concepts that specifically acknowledge more general elements of European integration and, at the same time, will be sensitive enough to accommodate the nuances of the more contextual aspects. For this reason fusion approaches represents a good point of departure. Fusion literature argues that a European fused polity is emerging; in which regional activities and potential involvement in EU-policy making process are related to the processes of Europeanization. This literature identifies two important dimensions of Europeanization, vertical and horizontal. These dimensions are fruitful to understand and analyze how the regional level interacts with the European Union.

The vertical dimension contains of both down-load, as well as up-load activities. First, there is a downloading process by the EU, which basically explains the top-down adaptation of domestic regional structures and processes, as a consequence of increasing demands from EU-policymaking. Second, there is a horizontal 'sideways' process where we can see co-operation among regional actors and institutions on the formulation of ideas, preferences and models that shape the notion of the regional interest in relation to supranational governance. The final phase refers to an uploading process in which the regional positions on EU questions are transferred to the supranational level.

By analysing the debate and interviews of different members of West Sweden, a great variety of preferences on how regional and local levels should handle EU-affairs, in relation to regional development, are identified. The pattern of preferences is further developed within the analytical framework that builds upon the theoretical concepts that has been described above. As a conclusion, it seems important to add a political dimension of 'interest' and 'power' to the concept of a 'variety of economic activities' and 'divergent local cultures' in order to assess regions potentials for sustainability and stability in economic growth and development.