



Festivals and the political dynamics of cultural policy

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Abstract

In this article, we account for the history of changes in festival policies at the state level of government in Norway from the 1990s to the present. The question we seek to illuminate is: What can these changes in festival policy tell us generally about the political dynamics of cultural policy in Norway? We show that the development of festival policies has proceeded along two different lines. One of these was the establishment of grant schemes for festivals administered by Concerts Norway and Arts Council Norway, where all festivals can compete for time-limited grants and where expert committees make decisions about public finance at “arm’s length” from the Ministry of Culture. The other line of policy development was the establishment of what was referred to as “hub-festivals”, a select group of festivals that became beneficiaries of direct finance from the Ministry of Culture. Thereby, state festival policy came to comprise two political dynamics, which we refer to as a “regulative” political dynamic and a “distributive” political dynamic. As such, festival policy illustrates the overall workings of state cultural policy in Norway, where actors tend to be either competing for temporary funding from arm’s length bodies and embedded in a regulative political dynamic or they are beneficiaries of permanent funding from the Ministry of Culture and embedded in a distributive political dynamic. A further observation that can be discerned from the history of festival policy is that the striving among actors in cultural life to enter into and uphold direct relations of patronage with the Ministry of Culture is a shaping force in cultural policy. As a result of this, cultural policy gravitates toward a distributive political dynamic.

Keywords

Festivals, cultural policy, public policy, political dynamic, distributive policy, patronage

Introduction

Over the past decades, a persistent tendency in international culture life has been the proliferation of festivals (Hobsbawm 2013). Norway is no exception in this regard. From the 1990s onward, the country has seen tremendous growth in the number of festivals, and today participation in festivals is an important reoccurring event in the lives of many Norwegians, and in particular members of the educated middle class (Aagedahl et al. 2009; Bjørkås 2004; Tjora 2013). Festivals make up a highly varied category in terms of the events’ size, form and cultural content, although a large majority are devoted mainly or exclusively to music. Typically, these are annual or biannual events that feature several or a multitude of cultural activities, such as concerts, theatrical performances or art exhibitions, and that

unfold in an atmosphere of festivity and “time out of time” (Fallassi 1987; Levang et al. 2017). Also, typically, festivals are based on a mixed economy, which combines market income, voluntary labour, and public funding (Aagedahl et al. 2009). As a result, many festivals lead a precarious economic existence, and even the largest and most professionalized festivals critically rely on the enthusiasm of large numbers of voluntary workers. Moreover, with rising competition for artists and festival audiences, Norwegian festivals have also increasingly relied on public funding.

The “festivalization” of cultural life that has occurred over the past decades in Norway has been recognized in cultural policy, mainly through establishing policies for public finance of festivals by national, regional and local governments. These festival policies may have contributed to swell in the number of festivals, as cultural events that were not previously named as such have been reclassified as festivals in order to qualify for public finance (Mangset & Hylland 2017). Over the past decades, there has been a marked growth in public funding for festivals, and in particular at the local (municipal) and national (state) levels of government (Henningsen et al. 2017; Henningsen & Takle 2023). However, the development of government finance policies for festivals at the state level has proven to be a rather tumultuous process, characterized by political controversy and the scrapping and possible re-establishment of a major scheme for public finance. In spite of the fact that policies for public support for festivals have been in place for more than a quarter of a century, this domain of cultural policy appears unsettled at present, as the Norwegian Government is yet to decide what form of state finance for culture festivals is to have in the future (Henningsen & Takle 2023).

In this article, we trace the history of changes in festival policy at the state level of government in Norway from the 1990s until the present. The question we seek to illuminate is: *What can these changes in festival policy tell us generally about the political dynamics of cultural policy in Norway?* We use the concept of political dynamics as a means of capturing differences in the political logic of development that are at play in cultural policy and how these make different spheres of cultural policy more or less stable or amenable to change, more or less conflictual and more or less open for actors to compete for government resources. Our use of the concept of political dynamics is anchored theoretically in the research field of public policy and the seminal categorisation scheme proposed by Theodore Lowi (1964; 1972; 1988). Lowi does not speak of political dynamics, but rather of different types of public *policies* and the forms of *politics* these tend to engender. He distinguishes between three types of public policies: distributive, regulatory and redistributive, and claims that each produces a characteristic form of politics, in the sense of political structure, political process, elites, and group relations. Of particular interest to the present study is the forms of policies Lowi refers to as distributive and regulative.

When we speak of political dynamics in this article, it refers to the totality of the relationships Lowi is describing: it refers both to observable patterns of government output or policies and to the forms of politics engendered by these policies. As we will show, the development of festival policies at the state level in Norway has proceeded along two different lines of policy development. One of these was the establishment of grant schemes for festivals administered by Concerts Norway (Rikskonsertene) and Arts Council Norway (Kulturrådet), where all festivals can compete for time-limited grants and where expert committees make decisions about public finance at “arm’s length” from the Ministry of Culture. The other line of policy development was the establishment of what was referred to as “hub-festivals”. This was a policy whereby a selected group of festivals became beneficiaries of direct finance from the Ministry of Culture on what was perceived to be a permanent

basis. Thereby, state festival policy came to comprise two political dynamics. Using Lowi's terms, we will refer to these as a "regulative" political dynamic and a "distributive" political dynamic.

In the following sections, we first account for the changes in the state's support for festivals from the 1990s until the present. Much of the changes that have occurred in state festival policy since the 1990s concern the hub-festival arrangement, and it is this line of policy development that is most revealing about the political dynamics of cultural policy. For these reasons, we concentrate our historical account on the various phases of development of this line of festival policy. Finally, in our discussion in the last part of the article, we seek to draw analytical insights from this history of policy development regarding the political dynamics at work in Norwegian cultural policy.

The empirical material we draw on in the article consists of document analysis and interviews from a research project on Arts Council Norway's support schemes for festivals that were carried out in 2021–2023 (Takle et al., 2023). Document analysis is employed to assess how central actors reason in the Storting (parliament), the Ministry of Culture and the Arts Council Norway. This includes examining government white papers presented to parliament (termed Reports to the Storting: St. Meld., also known as Meld. St. as of 2009), Acts the government presents for the parliament (known as Prop. L., also known as Ot. Prp. as of 2009), which lead to majority decisions in parliament and recommendation to the Storting from the Family and Culture Committee in the Storting (known as Inns. S.). We have also received several documents from the Ministry of Culture through questions to the department about public access to their archives. At the Arts Council Norway, we have reviewed strategy documents, area plans and guidelines for grant schemes.

In today's highly institutionalized society, most strategic objectives, political decisions and financial subsidies are justified in writing in publicly available documents. We have carried out what Asdal and Reinertsen (2020) call a practice-oriented document analysis where we study the documents as an integral part of the political dynamics of cultural policy. Accordingly, we study how the documents both represent an active action and how they are included as part of a practice. By analyzing the historical phases of the hub-festival arrangements we reveal the mechanisms or rationale behind the changes concerning the political dynamics of cultural policy. Since the empirical investigation extends over a longer period, from 1990 until today, we can reveal what or who triggered the changes, how they were implemented and what consequences different types of policies have for politics.

While the documents show the formalised interaction between the actors, we have conducted interviews to gain a better background for our understanding of the conduct of public policy in practice. We have interviewed six persons from the Arts Council Norway, four of them coming from the administration, and two are members of the committee for music festivals. Four interviews were semi-structured and conducted in the locations of the Arts Council in the first half of 2022, while two interviews were conducted digitally. In addition, we draw on interviews with a former politician and a civil servant from the Ministry of Culture that reflect directly on decision-making processes regarding the hub-festival arrangement. These interviews were conducted as a part of an ongoing research project on the political dynamics of the cultural sector financed by the Norwegian Research Council.¹

1. <https://www.oslomet.no/forskning/forskningsprosjekter/political-dynamics-of-the-cultural-sector-polycul>

The emergence of festival policies in Norway

Like most other European countries, Norway has several long-established festivals, and it is likely that such cultural events have received public funding for many decades. However, it was not until the mid-1990s that Norwegian authorities at the state level started to establish public finance schemes that specifically targeted festivals, or what can be termed festival policies. After the turn of the century, these policies gained momentum, as there was a substantial growth in the volume of state finance for festivals, and a greater number of festivals received public funding. This development coincided with and is partly explained by the growth in the number and visibility of festivals in cultural life (Aagedahl et al. 2009). It coincided also with greater recognition in cultural policy of music genres referred to as “rhythmic music”, such as jazz, rock, pop and tradition music. This became evident in particular after a centre-left government came into position in 2005 and initiated a surge to increase the state’s budgetary spending on culture, including forms of popular or commercial culture (Henningsen 2015; NOU 2013: 4). Many festivals are devoted mainly to the “rhythmic” music genres and one of the ways in which the government could channel strengthened support, e.g., for rock, blues or country music was through public finance of festivals devoted to these genres.

As noted, the development of festival policies in Norway has proceeded along two different lines. One line of development was establishing grant schemes for festivals administered by the arm’s length bodies Concerts Norway and Art Council Norway. These are application-based finance schemes open to all festivals, with set budgets, statutes and criteria for the awarding of financial support. Funding decisions are made by expert committees based on assessments of artistic excellence and professionalism. In 1994 Concert Norway established a support scheme for concerts, tours, and festivals, with a modest budget of NOK 3,3 million (Branstad, 1998). This was superseded in 1997 by a larger grant scheme explicitly devoted to music festivals. In 2001 the grant scheme for music festivals was transferred from Concerts Norway to Arts Council Norway. At this time, the support scheme contributed with funding for 41 festivals and had a budget of NOK 21, 6 million. Four years later, 59 festivals received funding from the grant scheme, which had a total budget of NOK 23,8 million.²

In the following years, the centre-left government strongly increased the state finance for festivals (NOU 2013: 4). In 2015, Art Council Norway provided funding for 98 festivals from a budget of NOK 48 million (Arts Council Norway 2016). The next year the budget made a great leap to NOK 137 million, distributed to 158 festivals. The grant scheme for music festivals has continued to grow until this day, making it the largest grants scheme administered by Arts Council Norway. In 2021 the grant scheme had a budget of NOK 163 million and provided funding for 181 festivals (Takle et al. 2023). The main reason for this tremendous growth in the grant scheme for festivals was the incorporation from 2016 of funding to what was referred to as “hub-festivals”. That year the Storting decided that the arrangement whereby a group of hub-festivals had become individually named recipients of funding from the state-budget should be terminated and that the funding should be transferred to the Art Council. This directs us to the second line of development of festival policy in Norway which emerged in parallel with the grant schemes under Concerts Norway and Art Council Norway. In the following sections, we account for three various phases from the establishment to the termination of the hub-festival policy, as also analysed in Takle, Bergsli and Dokken (2023).

2. <https://mb.cision.com/Public/MigratedWpy/80052/320824/9ffd519be48b5c8a.pdf>

The establishment of hub-festivals (1991-2007)

The hub policy was described for the first time in a white paper from 1991 (Report to the Storting no. 61 (1991-92)), where the Ministry of Cultural Affairs presented the aim to establish a nationwide network of institutions which together could provide a better offer of art and culture throughout the country. In addition to national institutions fully financed by the state, the network was to comprise hub-institutions which would receive 60 per cent of their funding from the state and 40 per cent from the county/municipality (Report to the Storting no. 61 (1991-92): 58). By establishing hub-institutions, an institutional network model was set up to take care of both the overall national responsibility and the local/regional need for self-government. The rationale was part of a general trend and in line with proposals made by experts in the late 1980s (NOU 1988: 28). The Ministry of Culture suggested that the hub policy should include regional theatres, symphony orchestras and visual art collections. The aim of establishing the network of hub-institutions was, according to the Ministry of Culture, to preserve Norway as “one kingdom” (Report to the Storting no. 61 (1991-92): 60).

However, the policy turned out differently than the Ministry of Cultural Affairs suggested. In 1995, the Storting decided to establish 13 hub-institutions, but these were of a different type. While the regional theatres and symphony orchestras were not included, ten of those, who gained status as hub-institutions were in visual arts and film. In addition, two well-established music festivals devoted to classic music and fine arts received this status: Bergen International Festival (1995) and True Northern Arts Festival (1995). At the turn of the millennium, most of the hub-institutions within visual arts were transferred to the National Museum Network (Report to the Storting no. 22 (1999-2000)). At the same time, the status as hub-institution was granted to 10 festivals in music, literature and performing arts: Trondheim International Olavsfest (1999), Molde International Jazz Festival (2000), Førde Traditional and World Music Festival (2005), Ultima Oslo Contemporary Music Festival (2006), Elverum Music Festival (2006), The Norwegian Festival of Literature (2006), Notodden Blues Festival (2007), Stiftelsen Horisont/Mela (2008), Peer Gynt-stemnet (2008) and Øya festival (2008).

The status as a hub-institution was important for the festivals selected to get this status, for several reasons. For one thing, it meant recognition as an important festival within the national network. According to Vestby (2019), the signal from the government was that this inclusion of various genres was also of great symbolic significance for the nation’s cultural policy. For another, it meant a substantial increase in public funding. The state budget for 1995 to 2008 shows that most hub-festivals increased their funding when they received this status and that the increase in funding continued in the following years. Compared to the festivals that received grants from the Arts Council, the level of funding for hub-festivals was much higher. In 2008, the grants from the state ranged from NOK 1.5 million for minor festivals to NOK 15.5 million for larger ones, such as Bergen International Festival, True Northern Arts Festival and Trondheim International Olavsfest (St.prp. 1 (2007-2008)).

As important perhaps as the increase in public funding that followed from the status as a hub institution was the perceived long-term financial security entailed by the status. In the context of Norwegian cultural policy, the designation “institution” has strong connotations of permanent state finance and relief from the risks of a market-based existence. Thus, whereas the festivals competing for time-limited grants from the Art Council in many cases found themselves in a situation of permanent financial insecurity, the hub festivals were to a larger extent shielded from market competition, having the Ministry of Culture as a guarantor of their continued existence.

Another difference between festivals supported by the Arts Council and hub festivals relates to the selection processes they were subjected to. As noted, decisions about funding from the grant scheme under the Art Council are delegated to an expert committee. Here, competition for the available funding is open to all festivals that meet the formal criteria of eligibility and decisions are made by set criteria centred on artistic quality and professionalism. The selection of festivals to attain hub status unfolded rather by a “political logic”, as it was a direct responsibility of the Ministry of Culture. From the 1990s to the publication of a white paper on hub-festivals in 2007, there were few publicly stated criteria and objectives for selecting festivals that achieved this status. While the festivals that were selected for hub-status all had leading positions within their respective artistic fields, and this obviously must have weighed in on the decisions, there is a high probability that the decisions were informed by political considerations regarding the regional and sectoral distribution of resources as well and by the lobbying of various organized interests. As is indicated by the list of hub festivals above, the selection of these institutions followed a political logic of geographic and sectoral distribution, ensuring that all regions of the country and a variety of art forms (music, visual art, literature, theatre) and genres (classic music, jazz, rock/pop, church music, blues contemporary music, tradition music, world music) got “their own” hub-festivals.

Moreover, as was pointed out in our interviews with committee members and administrators from the Art Council, the fight to uphold and increase public finance was very different for festivals supported by the Art Council and for the hub-festivals. A member of the expert committee in the Art Council, a former leader of a hub-festival, explained that for most festivals, the struggle for public funding is a matter of convincing the expert committee about the artistic quality and professionalism of the festivals. For hub-festivals that aimed to increase their funding from the Ministry of Culture, this was instead a matter of political lobbying, directly with national politicians in the Government or the parliamentary committee that deals with culture or indirectly through regional politicians that can promote the festivals’ interests in the national arena.

These differences in the management of the grant scheme for music festivals under Concerts Norway / Art Council Norway and the hub-festivals are reflected in differences in the level of public debate and political controversy associated with the two policies. Throughout its existence, the grant scheme for music festivals has been subjected to public debate on the prioritization of various genres and festivals. In particular, individuals and organizations representing the rock/pop genres have criticized the grant scheme for favouring other genres. Rock festivals made such complaints at the time when the grant scheme was administered by Concerts Norway³, as well as today. In recent years, the decision by the expert committee to decline the application for financial support from the Øya Festival, has caused much debate (Henningsen & Takle 2023). By contrast, the selection and management of hub-festivals from the 1990s to the late 2000s did not generate notable public debate or political protests.

Evaluation and termination of the hub-festivals (2008-2015)

The expansion of the hub-festival policy in 1991-2008 can be seen as the development of a new type of cultural institution, in addition to the existing state-financed national and regional cultural institutions. However, the hub-festivals did not attain the level of security

3. <https://www.nrk.no/kultur/sma-porsjoner-av-festival-kaka-1.541936>

of finance as the established theatres, orchestras and museums. This was made clear by the government in September 2007, in connection with the presentation of the state budget for 2008, which specified that a reduction in the support would be considered if the hub-festivals did not ensure good achievements in terms of artistic, professional and audience goals (St.prp. 1 (2007-2008)). Later the same year, the Ministry of Culture published a white paper titled: *Hub - Criteria for hub status and assessment of the implementation of the hub assignment* (Report to the Storting no. 10 (2007-2008)). The Ministry stated explicitly that the purpose of this white paper was to give the hub-institutions a new definition, which would be crucial for how it aimed to evaluate the hub-festivals every four years in the future (Report to the Storting no. 10 (2007-2008)).

The new definition was based on nine criteria centred on the idea that hub-festivals should have a leading position within their respective genres. Included among the criteria were that the hub-festivals should take a role of coordination and collaboration with other festivals within the same genre, that they should present artists at a high national and international level, and that they should contribute to renewing and developing its genre. The white paper was supported by the Storting (Inst. S. 168 (2007-2008)). There were some disagreements in the Storting, but there were only concerning what kind of functions the hub institutions should have and not the hub scheme as such.

In the white paper on the hub-festivals, the Ministry of Culture also stated that there should be no “inflation” in how many festivals should gain the status as a hub (Report to the Storting no. 10 (2007-2008)). A probable background for the ministry’s stated concern about possible inflation of hub-festivals is found in the national museum reform implemented at this time. This reform was initiated at the turn of the century to curb a massive growth in the number of state-sponsored local museums from the 1970s onward, which had created what the ministry viewed as an “ungovernable diversity” of museums (Eriksen 2012). Nevertheless, from 2009 to 2015, two new hub-festivals were established: Riddu Ridđu Festivála (2009) and Norsk Countrytreff (2011), continuing the process of geographical and sectoral distribution. In these cases, hub-festivals were established in the western and northern regions of the country and extended to the country music genre and the culture of the indigenous Sami population.

In 2010, the Ministry of Culture initiated the evaluation of hub-festivals that was announced in the white paper. Each hub-festival was evaluated concerning how they fulfilled the criteria described in the document through. The evaluation process combined self-evaluation by the hub-festivals, assessments from municipalities and local partners and assessments from other festivals from the same genres. In addition, the Arts Council Norway was commissioned to evaluate the artistic achievement of nine hub-festivals. By inviting these different actors to participate in the evaluation process, the Ministry of Culture opened a broad public debate in which the public support for each hub was assessed. This involvement also led to media debates.

The main themes discussed in the evaluation process and the media debates were how the hub-festivals provided regional competence and whether they were nationally leading festivals within their genres. It was emphasised that the hub-festival policy discarded the competition between festivals because the hub-festivals had advantages other festivals did not have. For example, questions were raised as to why festivals in Norway were divided into two sectors, where 100 festivals receive around 45 million Norwegian kroner while 12 festivals receive around 80 million.⁴ An often-used argument was that the predictability and

4. Dagsavisen 10.07.2014, <https://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/2014/07/10/widvey-hasteevaluerer-festivaler/>

financial support the hub-festivals received should also be given to other festivals. Overall, the evaluation process shows that there was resistance to the idea that hub-festivals should have more funding than other festivals without this status.

In September 2015, the Ministry of Culture proposed to the Storting to terminate the hub-festival policy (St.Prop.1 (2015-2016): 68-69). In the few references made to the evaluation, the Ministry pointed out that several actors believe that the purpose of the hub scheme has not been fulfilled to a sufficient degree, and the scheme seems unfortunate for the development of the music sector, partly because it distorts competition. Moreover, it emphasised that the large differences between institutions included in the hub-festival policy make it problematic to treat these as one scheme with common criteria for all recipients. The Ministry concluded that “(w)hen the overall objectives of the scheme are not achieved, prioritising certain festivals over others may appear to be unfair and arbitrary, and not based on professional and objective criteria” (St.Prop.1 (2015-2016): 68-69, our own translation). Therefore, the Ministry proposed to transfer most of the hub-festivals to the grant schemes for festivals managed by the Arts Council Norway. Simultaneously, it encouraged the Arts Council to consider a differentiated and more dynamic festival scheme in which the foremost/largest festivals can be given multi-year grants to ensure predictability and further development (St.Prop.1 (2015-2016): 68-69).

On 9 December 2015, the Storting decided to terminate the hub-festival policy and transfer the management of 15 hub-festivals from the Storting and the Ministry of Culture to the Arts Council Norway, while a film festival was transferred to the Norwegian Film Institute (Innst. 14 S (2015–2016)). With this decision, the Storting had, in principle, relinquished its authority over the management of the hub-festivals. However, as a part of the decision, the Family and Culture Committee made several recommendations for how the Arts Council Norway should design the grant schemes for festivals after the inclusion of the hub-festivals. The central aspects of these recommendations were that the former hub-festivals should be recognised as “spearheads” both within genres and regions, they should have predictability with multi-year grants, and the scheme should emphasise regional anchoring with grants from local authorities. At the same time, the committee underscored the importance that there should be a levelling in the amount of funding that is awarded to festivals of a “comparable” position within the same genres (Innst. 14 S (2015–2016): 53).

Previous hub festivals managed by the Arts Council Norway (2016-2023)

In 2016, the hub scheme was terminated, and 12 music festivals were transferred to the Arts Council’s support scheme for music festivals, while the remaining four were transferred to the Art Council’s grant schemes for visual art, performing arts and literature and to the Film Institute. In 2018 the previous hub-festivals were assessed on an equal footing with the other festivals by the Art Council for the first time. This year, the committee for music festivals decided to cut the allocation to all the previous hub-festivals by ten per cent. According to an interview with a member of the committee, the reason was that there was no increase in allocations from the Storting and the Ministry of Culture, and the goal was to level out the grants allocated to festivals. This meant the former hub-festivals should not have special treatment but rather compete with the other festivals. However, in the same year, 56 festivals received multi-year grants, which according to the committee, represented an increase in predictability. Moreover, a new provision was added to the guidelines stating that significant reductions for festivals cannot be adopted without prior notice. This applied

particularly to the large festivals and meant, in effect, that the predictability regarding future funding for the former hub-festivals was nearly the same as it had been when they were hub-festivals.

While several of the hub-festivals have received steady support since 2018, there has been a decline in the allocations for some of these festivals. In 2020, the committee decided to decline the Øya festival grant on the grounds that it is commercial and distributes profit to the owners. Apart from such minor changes, state festival policy has remained the same after 2016. However, in recent years the Storting and the government have signalled concern over the effects of this policy. In the state budget for 2022, the Ministry of Culture announced that it is considering permanent grants for festivals (Prop. 1 S (2021–2022), s. 58). At stake here, in other words, is a re-establishment of an arrangement with direct funding from the ministry to festivals. In light of this, state festival policy appears unsettled today. One probable reason for this is that festivals and other cultural policy actors are pushing for a change of this type.

In interviews with a former politician and civil servant from the Ministry of Culture that were directly involved in the decision to terminate the hub-festival arrangement, they underscored that this decision was strongly contested by hub-festivals. Like many other cultural organizations, it was pointed out, festivals much prefer to be under the direct patronage of the Ministry of Culture – to have a “spot on the state budget” as it is referred to colloquially – to other forms of public finance. In meetings between the ministry and one of the largest hub-festivals, the politician and civil servant explained, the hub festival made it clear that it would rather accept a reduction in the grant of NOK 1 million than to be transferred to the Art Council. Even though a principled decision was made to terminate the hub-festival arrangement and transfer all of the hub-festivals to the Art Council, it was pointed out, this has not prevented that other festivals have been awarded with a spot on the state budget, as a result of budget negotiations in the Storting. Given the important role and position festivals have acquired in cultural life, it seems likely that the demands for permanent state finance will continue in the years to come.

Festival policies and the political dynamics of cultural policy

Having accounted for the history of changes in state festival policy in Norway from the 1990s until the present, we now turn to the question of what this reveals more generally about the political dynamics of cultural policy. In narrow terms, this is a story of the rise and fall – and possible re-establishment under a new name – of the hub-festivals as a form of state-sponsored cultural institutions. It is also a story of the unfolding and, eventually, the collision of two forms of policy development and political dynamics associated with these, related to public finance for festivals. As such, the history of state festival policies carries a broader significance, as it illustrates the principal forms of political dynamics at work in Norwegian state cultural policy.

As mentioned in the introduction, our use of the concept of political dynamic is inspired by Theodore Lowi's (1964; 1972; 1988) theoretical account of different kinds of policies and the forms of politics these give rise to. Lowi's point of departure is the assumption that “policy determines politics”. The types of relationships people enter into, he notes, are determined by their expectations, by what they hope to achieve from relating to others. In politics, expectations are determined by existing governmental outputs or policies so that “for every type of policy there is likely to be a distinctive type of political relationship” (1964: 688). More generally, Lowi asserts that different types of policies produce distinctive “power

arenas”, each one of which exhibits a “characteristic political structure, political process, elites, and group relations” (1964: 689-690). When we speak of political dynamics, it refers to different forms of policies and the form of politics of power arenas these engender. Of particular relevance to this study are the forms of policies he describes as “regulative” and “distributive”. In Norway, we argue, state festival policy, and cultural policy in general, unfolds in accordance with a regulative political dynamic and a distributive political dynamic.

The line of development of state festival policy in Norway that runs through the grant scheme administered by Concerts Norway and Art Council Norway is illustrative generally of the parts of the state’s funding of cultural life that is delegated to arm’s length bodies. This is a long-established form of cultural policy in Norway, dating back to the nineteenth century when expert committees were set up to administer stipends for artists and other cultural workers (Dahl & Helseth 2006). Today, most of these resources are channelled through the Art Council Norway, Government Grants for Artists, the Norwegian Film Institute, The Audio and Visual Fund and artist associations (Ministry of Culture 2016). Apart from delegating decisions regarding public funding to peer review expert committees, a characteristic of these policy vehicles is that the funding they provide for cultural life mostly consists of project grants and other forms of time-limited grants. A further characteristic is the relative transparency of decision-making regarding public finance for cultural life. In all of the abovementioned arm’s length bodies, funding is allocated on the basis of applications to grant schemes, each of which has set budgets, objectives, and criteria for the assessment of applications.

In terms of Lowi’s (1964) categorization system, these parts of cultural policy correspond most closely to what he terms regulative policy. The implementation of regulative policies, he notes, is often made by decentralised units, by a delegation from the centre. These are policies that provide conditions and restrictions for the activities of individuals and groups and for the allocation of government resources, e.g., in the form of objectives and rules. Lowi stresses that regulatory policy involves direct choices as to who will receive government support and who will not, which makes it clear to the actors involved that the policy is about prioritising scarce resources. Individual decisions, therefore, involve confrontations between those who receive support and those who do not or between the “winners” and “losers” in the fight to attain government resources. Due to these features, regulative policies tend to produce a power arena characterized by instability and conflict. The power structure tends to be pluralistic and multi-centred, and political relations often have an unstable or provisional character. Political processes tend to involve open competition and compromise between actors seeking government resources.

Lowi’s depiction of what can be termed a regulative political dynamic is highly descriptive of the development from the 1990s onward of festival policies administered by Concerts Norway and Art Council Norway. As we have seen, this applies to the relatively transparent set-up of these policies as grant schemes with set budgets, objectives, criteria, etc. We have also seen that over time, this part of the state’s festival policy has constantly invited public debate and political mobilization regarding the prioritization of genres and singular festivals. More generally, the description of a regulative political dynamic fits well with the overall workings of the parts of the state cultural policy that are channelled through arm’s length bodies, as these are more often subject to changes and tend to invite more political conflict and public debate than other forms of cultural policy arrangements in Norway. For instance, Arts Council Norway has for decades been criticised by actors in regional cultural life for its alleged favouring of cultural life in the capital city (NOU 2013: 4).

While the use of arm's length bodies is a well-established and much commented part of Norwegian cultural policy at the state level, these can nevertheless be seen to play a minor role in cultural policy when considering the totality of the state's budgetary spending on culture. It has been estimated that the abovementioned arm's length bodies account for 23 per cent of the funding of cultural life from the Ministry of Culture (Ministry of Culture 2014: 40). By implication, three-quarters of the ministry's budget is allocated directly to actors in cultural life. The political dynamic characteristic of these parts of cultural policy is illustrated by the second line of festival policy development we have accounted for, which runs through hub-festivals. We have seen that decisions regarding which festivals that was to attain hub status were a direct responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, and hence of the political executive, and that decision-making processes related to the selection of hub-festivals and the level of support they received were of a more convoluted character than with the Arts Council. Another difference between the two avenues of public finance for festivals was that the Ministry of Culture was a more generous patron than the Art Council and that this financial support was perceived to be permanent.

As such, the establishment of hub festivals can be seen as a continuation of a process that has been at the core of cultural policy in Norway since the nineteenth century. In their account of the history of cultural policy in Norway from 1814 to the present, Dahl & Helseth (2006) show how the central government gradually – often reluctantly and as a result of prolonged pressure from civil society actors – have expanded its engagement in cultural life, by turning cultural organizations into state-financed institutions. This is consistent with how the present workings of state cultural policy are described in a report from the Ministry of Culture. According to the report, a distinguishing feature of cultural policy is “the practice whereby grants are distributed to individually named beneficiaries in connection with the budgetary process” (Ministry of Culture 2018: 45). The report notes that a large share of the budgetary resources available for cultural policy is distributed in accordance with this practice and that this is an outcome of “decisions made over several decades, some based on whitepapers and reports from the Ministry of Culture and others based on decision-making processes in the Stortinget” (Ministry of Culture 2018: 51). The report notes further that this is a long-established practice that has intensified from the 1970s onward and that the reason that most actors in the cultural sector prefer these arrangements over other forms of public funding is that they are seen to provide them with permanent funding and therefore with a position of long-term economic security (cf. also Simonsen 2005).

This line of cultural policy in Norway conforms for a large part to what Lowi (1964) terms distributive policy or alternatively as patronage. As Lowi points out, distributive policy often implies the allocation of resources for basic services (such as education, infrastructure or cultural institutions) and the implementation of such policies is normally centralised and made by a state unit. Distributive policies are characterized by the ease with which public resources can be “disaggregated and dispensed unit by small unit” and in isolation from general rules and principles. In other words, it is a form of policy where long-term governmental strategies and universalist aims and objectives are subordinated to more immediate concerns of who is to gain access to government resources and where each decision about the allocation of public resources can be dealt with without regard to other decisions. In distributive policy, the prioritization aspects of decisions are hidden from view, as the “indulged and the deprived, the loser and the recipient, need never come into direct confrontation” (1964: 690). According to Lowi, distributive policy produces a power arena characterized by fragmentation of interests, stability and a relative lack of conflict. Political processes in this arena tend to take the forms of quiet lobbying and cooptation rather than

conflict and compromise and political relations tend to be based on norms of “mutual non-interference”, which makes it appropriate for actors to lobby their own interests in relation to the government but not to contest those of other actors. We have seen that this description of what we refer to as a distributive political dynamic captures well the workings of the line of festival policy development that ran through the hub-festivals.

Thus, from the early 1990s and throughout the 2000s, state festival policy in Norway came to comprise two types of policy, which developed in accordance with a regulative and a distributive political dynamic respectively. As such, the state festival policy of this period provides us with an apt illustration of the overall workings of state cultural policy in Norway: The actors included in state cultural policy tend to be either competing for temporary funding from arm’s length bodies and embedded in a regulative political dynamic or they are actual or prospective beneficiaries of permanent funding from the Ministry of Culture and embedded in a distributive political dynamic. The actors that rely on funding from arm’s length bodies find themselves in a “noisy” and unstable policy environment, in the sense that policies are subjected to open interest struggles and public debates and in the sense of regularly occurring policy changes. These policies account for a relatively small part of the state’s budgetary spending on culture. The actors relying on direct funding from the Ministry of Culture find themselves in a stable and “calm” policy environment. Here, struggles over access to government resources rarely surfaces as open political conflict and confrontations. Instead, actors seek to promote their interests more quietly and along backchannels of influence, while awaiting their turn to be awarded with “a spot on the state-budget” or with an increase in funding. These policies account for the bulk of the state’s budgetary spending on culture.

Up until the 2010s, these two forms of political dynamics unfolded in parallel and more or less uninterrupted by each other in state festival policy, as festivals were relegated into one of two separate spheres of public finance. When the Ministry of Culture initiated the evaluation of the hub-festivals and other measures that aimed to reframe this policy arrangement as a grant scheme with clear criteria and objectives, this caused a shift from a distributive to a regulative political dynamic and a collapse of the boundary between the two spheres of festival policy. Public debates arose concerning which festivals that rightfully are to enter into individual relations of patronage with the Ministry of Culture and concerning differences in the level of public finance for festivals that compete in the same markets for artists and audiences, which eventually led to the termination of the hub-festival arrangement.

It is worth underlining that this chain of events is a highly unusual occurrence in the parts of state cultural policy that take the form of direct funding from the Ministry of Culture and that develops in accordance with a distributive political dynamic. As was pointed out in interviews with the former politician and civil servants from the Ministry of Culture, it rarely happens that actors who have been “placed on the state budget” lose this privilege. As a result of this practice, the ministry must deal with a steady expansion in its historically accumulated financial responsibilities for actors in cultural life. This conforms to Henningsen’s (2015) observation that cultural policy in Norway develops on a “sedimentary” growth-pattern. In a study from Sweden, Wikberg makes a similar observation regarding the sedimentary character of cultural policy, and notes that cultural policy consists essentially of “layers and layers of different agreements and decisions, decided at different times and in different contexts” (2021: 83). As noted above, a probable reason that the ministry initiated the evaluation and other measures to curb the “inflation” of hub-festivals was a concern that this might lead to financial overburdening. The reality of this concern has been demonstrated in French state cultural policy. As Urfalino notes, in the late 1990s, the Ministry of Culture’s acquired running costs in France had grown to a point where it was

unable to take on the financing of new operations and was left with “no choice but to manage what already exists” (2002[1997]: 179).

In spite of the termination of the hub-festival policy and the enrollment of former hub-festivals under the Art Council, state festival policy in Norway appears unsettled today. As we have seen, the government is currently considering a re-establishment of the practice whereby some festivals become beneficiaries of direct funding from the Ministry of Culture. This would mean a return to a distributive political dynamic in the festival policy. One reason for this, which we have touched on several places, is that many festivals (as well as other actors from cultural life) much prefer to be under the direct patronage of the ministry to other forms of public finance and push on the government to establish such arrangements. Apart from the prestige that accrues to the status as a state-sponsored institution, this push for direct political patronage is rooted in festivals and other cultural organizations’ experience of economic vulnerability and risk. As Henningsen & Røyseng (2023) show, in cultural organizations’ communication with the state, this experience of vulnerability is foregrounded, along with demands that the state should act as their long-term protector. For festivals and other cultural organizations, to be awarded with “a place on the state budget” is seen as tantamount to being transposed into an economic “safe zone”. This alerts us to a final general insight regarding the political dynamic of cultural policy in Norway that can be discerned from the history of festival policy: An important shaping force in cultural policy is the striving among actors in cultural life for the establishment or sustenance of direct relations of patronage with the Ministry of Culture. As a result of this, cultural policy gravitates toward a distributive political dynamic.

Conclusion

In this article, we have traced the history of public support policies for festivals at the state level in Norway. We have shown that state festival policy has developed along two different lines: One of these goes through Concerts Norway and Art Council Norway and is associated with a regulative political dynamic. The other went through hub-festivals financed directly from the Ministry of Culture and is associated with a distributive political dynamic. As such, we have argued, the history of festival policy illustrates the workings of state cultural policy in general. The actors included in state cultural policy tend to be either relying on funding from arm’s length bodies and embedded in a regulative political dynamic, or they rely on direct patronage from the Ministry of Culture and are embedded in a distributive political dynamic. A further observation we have made regarding the political dynamic of state cultural policy is that actors in cultural life prefer direct relations of patronage with the ministry over other forms of public finance and that cultural policy, therefore, gravitates toward a distributive political dynamic. We have studied Norwegian policy, but we may assume that the political dynamics of the cultural sector we have revealed in Norway can be found in other Nordic countries.

We have also noted that a large share of the resources the state allocates to cultural life is channeled through direct lines of patronage and, therefore, with policies associated with a distributive political dynamic. This should serve as an incentive for cultural policy researchers to take these parts of cultural policy under closer scrutiny. However, in order to do so cultural policy research must move beyond an exclusive concern with discursive manifestations of cultural policy. As we have indicated, a distributive policy is not an implementation of stated long-term policy objectives and strategies that can be read off from white papers and government reports. Rather, these are patterns of decisions regarding the allocation of government resources that arises from ongoing negotiations in the power

arena. As Lowi notes, distributive policies are virtually not policies at all but “highly individualized decisions that only by accumulation can be called a policy” (1964: 690). To gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the many decisions whose outcome we refer to as cultural policy is a challenging task. In our opinion, this is a challenge that cultural policy research should welcome.

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