

Promoting and Democratizing Literature

A Norwegian Policy Success

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A Crisis Averted

In the early 1960s, Norwegian literature faced a potential crisis. In a small country and language area on the outskirts of Europe, translated books began to dominate the book market. This created fear for the future of the Norwegian language and culture, but there was also concern for the individual artists, as at that time very few writers could make a living from writing (Fidjestøl 2015: 17).

According to Itamar Even-Zohar (1990: 47), a prominent contributor to the understanding of the interplay between national and translated literatures, the trend in Norway at the time has been observed in many other small language European countries. The typical result is a weak national literature, and a high dependence on and influence from imported books. In this article we argue that Norwegian literary policy, which was developed as an answer to this challenge, not only prevented such a development, but also brought Norwegian literature to a high level on many indicators.

Two decades after World War II, the Norwegian Social Democratic reign was at its height, and the literary policy that emerged was strongly influenced by the democratic corporatist model. In this governance system public policy in each societal domain is developed in close cooperation between the state and the important stakeholders. Further, policy implementation is typically conducted within an institutional framework which promotes compromises between several inter-related goals and interests, as well as the development of a consensus between the stakeholders regarding these goals (Rokkan 1966). The heritage from nation-building and democratization measures in the nineteenth century has also been an important factor influencing Norway's literary policy.

The underlying value proposition and theory of change underpinning Norway's literary policy were broadly oriented but still well defined. It had four aims: To preserve and protect Norwegian language and culture, to improve the writers' personal economy and in that way also secure an aftergrowth of new voices, secure

more stable frameworks for the commercial intermediaries that also represent a national infrastructure, and, finally, secure the accessibility, dissemination and consumption of Norwegian literature among the public (Naper 1997: 11–12; Rønning and Slaatta 2019). Over the years, objectives like democratization, free speech and diversity have come to be stressed more in policy documents (relating to literary policy as to cultural policy discourses more broadly). For example, a renewed interest in the conditions for free speech resulted in a reformulation of the Constitution's §100 in 2014—the free speech article—which underlined the values of truth, democracy and the right to free opinions (Rønning and Slaatta 2019: 16ff). These are not new objectives, rather a result of a shifting balance between an interconnected set of goals.

Literary Policy's Evolving Architecture

Norwegian literature policy consists of various elements that build on and support each other, whereof the larger part was introduced in the 1960s. These measures have both been expanded and built upon since.

The most important instrument, at least for fiction writers whom the arrangement was originally meant for, is the *Book Purchasing Scheme*—the state's purchasing of a significant number of copies of a large number of new Norwegian quality books for public libraries each year. This contributes to strengthening the market of Norwegian quality literature, by securing more predictability for both authors and publishers.

A *VAT-exemption* for books contributes to stability and predictability in the same way. An exception from competition legislation furthermore gives the literary organizations and the Publishers' Association the right both to negotiate standard royalty contracts and regulate prices (Halvorsen 2020: 93). This tool also includes the so-called *Book Treaty*, an agreement between the Norwegian Publishers' Association and the Norwegian Booksellers' Association that was also approved by the state. The treaty requires publishers and bookstores to operate with fixed prices for new books. In return for this, each publisher is responsible for distributing books on demand to any bookstore. Bookstores play an important role in the system, as they are required to acquire any Norwegian book on demand from a customer—the so-called *skaffeplikt*. These obligations also contribute to the ambitious Norwegian district policy objective, and provide equal service throughout the country.

The book purchasing scheme also contributes greatly to the goal of providing the whole Norwegian population with easy access to quality literature through *the library system*. All 356 Norwegian municipalities have such public libraries, which is required by law. Today, the sets of approximately 600 book titles annually

purchased in the Book Purchasing Scheme, represent a substantial part of the books acquired by the public libraries (Halvorsen and Lien 2020: 393).

This leads to another building block, the *Library Compensation Fund*. Authors are compensated for income they lose from sales when their books are being freely available in public libraries. The compensations are distributed to the author associations, which in turn distribute the funds among the authors as individual grants based on application. In other words, the library compensation fund is a collective resource within the author community. The *Copy Compensation Fund* has a similar function, in that it compensates writers collectively for the copying and distribution of copyrighted material but is based on statistics and distributed to rightsholders based on the statutes of the Norwegian Copyright Act.

Norwegian literary policy also includes several aid schemes for *culture communication measures*—from support of literature festivals to the globally unique dissemination scheme for professional art and culture to all Norwegian school and high-school pupils—‘The Cultural Schoolbag’. Another important element is the state-financed NORLA, (Norwegian Literature Abroad), which promotes the export of Norwegian literature through promotion work and translation subsidies. Finally, there has also been a set of state grants that are not part of the collective compensation fund arrangements.

Although the state funds the literary support schemes, it has as a principle remained at arm’s length of its distribution. A considerable part of the direct support (grants etc.) is administered through an independent body, the Arts Council Norway. Other parts of the support are managed by the different associations and institutions involved. The process of deciding which books are to be purchased is furthermore conducted by committees composed of skilled members suggested by the stakeholder groups (literates, publishers, book traders and librarians), and the same applies to grants and compensation arrangements. Thus, the system has a clear corporative character, while the decision making follows a distinct art logic, in which procurement is decided by committees of qualified readers (Neple 2020: 128–129). Rønning and Slaatta (2019: 22) describe these boards as ‘the foremost instruments of literary policy (in Norway)’, as they perform quality assessments that in many ways resemble the system of peer review in the academy.

Despite the inter-relatedness between the various measures, the purchasing instrument promotes several of the policy aims on its own. The regulations of the publishing industry and the regime of standard contracts have further provided equal terms for commercially successful authors and niche authors. It has also reduced the price difference between literature with high and low sales, making all sorts of literature more available. The decision to organize the library and copy compensation into collective funds has the same equalizing effect. In all, the system stimulates both the creation, the publication and consumption of quality literature. In addition, it stimulates the development of new authorships.

Literary policy has many winners large and small, and yet few big losers. Most actors in the field of literature are well served by the policy—although the system has traditionally had an in-built precedence for fiction, and other kinds of literature, most notably non-fiction, has had to struggle hard to be included. The funding has also not been increased as much as to cover the growth in possible beneficiaries. One main criticism from stakeholders has primarily been that the system is not more comprehensive than it is. The few actors that are not necessarily only winners include the most commercially successful authors, who have parts of their income distributed to less commercially well-off colleagues. But even the top sellers benefit from the support in promoting Norwegian literature domestically and abroad, and commercial success is also no obstacle to competing for collective grants.

This system has survived for almost 60 years.¹ It has been evaluated several times and all these evaluations, including the most recent, conclude that it has been highly successful (Halvorsen et al. 2020: 463). The main features of the policy have also been remarkably stable despite a wide variation in political governing coalitions throughout the years. The mere fact that the system has not only survived, but also regularly attracted interest from new actors in the field, testifies to its solid standing.

The administration of the various literary instruments has also proved to be very cost-effective, which may be the product of sound policy design. To a large degree, existing institutions such as the literary associations and the libraries have been involved in its management, which means the demand for additional administrative capacity has been more modest than it could otherwise have been.²

The democratic–corporatist approach, in which the state cooperates with stakeholders in the field to manage a coherent literary policy, in combination with a distinct art logic in which the state maintains an arm’s length from the actual decisions, has therefore proved to be a good compromise. As we will see further on in the chapter, however, this does not mean that the system has not been contested, or that it has not had its opponents through the years. In particular, two important counter-narratives have manifested themselves during the last decades.

How the System Came into Being

Although its main elements were a result of Social Democratic reforms from the 1960s, the cultural policies that laid the foundation for Norway’s current literary

¹ The Copy Compensation Fund and the dissemination schemes (inland and abroad) are of a younger date than the rest of the system.

² The procurement scheme is the ‘most expensive’ part, but the allocations over the central government budget are modest, less than NOK 100 million a year, 0.5 per cent of the cultural budget of NOK 20 billion.

policy date back to the nineteenth century. The library system is a case per se, as important tools of modernization as well as nation-building derived from a strive for independence after almost 400 years of Danish rule and then 90 in a union with Sweden. From the 1880s, the Norwegian state began to fund libraries. When Norway received full independence in 1905, there were library collections partly on public funding in almost all municipalities. This well-functioning distribution system for books has generally had an important effect on literacy and subsequently democratic participation (NOU 1991:14), and is currently a backbone in the system.

The first Norwegian public library law was passed in 1935 and strengthened in 1947, and as one of the first countries in the world, Norway established a small so-called Library Compensation Fund, based on the idea that writers should be rewarded and compensated for library lending of their books (Andreassen 2006: 35). Already in the nineteenth century the Norwegian state also supported authors with grants, although on a small scale, and at that time it functioned as a reward for previous achievements, mostly tied to the idea of nation-building, and did not harbour any of the redistributive characteristics of today's system.

In the wake of World War II, political parties of all hues gathered to carve out a common programme for the reconstruction, including a set of cultural policy goals that had as a common denominator the concern for the common good (Andreassen 2006: 34). The increased purchasing power and wealth that was ushered in with the reconstruction (and the Marshall aid), was however not primarily spent on cultural products and services, and in particular not such products of Norwegian origin. This was the background for the situation at the beginning of the 1960s, when it was claimed that the number of published Norwegian fiction novels, short story and poetry collections had shrunk by over 50 per cent in a little over 30 years (Ringdal 1993: 298, Andreassen, 2006: 36).

Building momentum

The 1960s saw a chain of rapid developments. Already in 1962, the *Book Treaty* was established as a response to the concerns about declining book sales, an agreement that required an exemption from the existing price and competition laws.

In 1965, the purchasing scheme for (fiction) books was born. The original idea came from the head of the major public library in the capital Oslo, Henrik Hjørtøy. Key players in the further planning of what became a permanent literary policy was the leader of the Norwegian Authors' Union ('Forfatterforeningen', established 1893), Hans Heiberg, Torolf Elster in The Workers' Enlightenment Federation (AOF), and Helge Sivertsen, head of the Ministry of Church and Education (the ministry in charge of culture at the time). The ministry proposed to establish a

cultural fund, based on an existing VAT on books and a new VAT on magazines (Ringdal 1993: 297ff.).

All key players were either close to the Labour government or even part of it, though it was never a Labour project alone: there was relatively broad political agreement about the need to protect and further Norwegian literature—not primarily for literature’s own sake, but to ensure the viability of Norwegian culture at large. In a way, art got the task of saving the culture (Bjerke 2020: 42).

Contestation

There were, however, also many faultlines. For one, there was initially considerable disagreement between the writers and the publishers. Both parties shared a concern for Norwegian language and literature, but the publishers were fighting for the removal of tax on books, and opposed the financing of the proposed system by new taxes on certain publications (Ringdal 1993: 300 ff.). The writers had no such qualms, and felt the publishers were being obstructionist. Conservative politicians and debaters had opposed the fixed-price element of the Book Treaty, but the then Directorate of Prices had used its power to advance the interests of the districts and the district booksellers—and the publishers and booksellers eventually complied.³

Some feared that the new arrangement would lead to the production of more literature of low quality, others that the state would act as a ‘cultural tyrant’, micro-managing Norwegian cultural production (Fidjestøl 2015: 259). The leader of the Publishers’ Association, Henrik Groth, protested heavily against what he described as ‘censorship and state governing of intellectual life’. Some actors in the conservative press heavily opposed what they saw as state interference from the ‘socialist state’, whereas Hans Heiberg, who fronted the campaign on behalf of the authors, was described as ‘the closest one could get to a Soviet culture commissary’ (Ringdal 1993: 300).

A political cleavage even emerged among librarians, where a conservative wing feared that the reform would lead to the state determining the libraries’ supply, whereas a Social Democratic/ Socialist wing of younger librarians advocated heavily for a more organized supply of Norwegian literature (Ringdal 1993: 302–303). Among politicians there were also elements of anti-elitist criticism against such government funding of ‘high-brow’ culture. In all, the critical voices did not have considerable political support (Bjerke 2020: 50–51), and in 1965 parliament passed the act of a culture fund that was to be financed by a magazine tax, albeit after fierce debate. The concerns about state ‘micro management’ were resolved by

³ The districts have for historical and economic reasons (fishery, waterfalls, oil, shipping) had a strong position in the Norwegian political system (Rokkan 1966; Bjørklund 1999; see also Nord 2015 for an interesting comparison between Norway and Sweden).

establishing the Arts Council Norway which administered the fund at arm's length from the state.

Compromise: The purchasing scheme

The disagreement between the stakeholders was also soon solved, in a way which shows that after all there was a considerable will to cooperate: It was decided that *all* books published by the members of the Publishers' Associations⁴ should be bought by the newly established Arts Council. This led to the introduction of the purchasing scheme for books with 1,000 exemplars of each title.⁵

After a few years, a control mechanism was introduced (Bjerke 2020: 47ff), but by then the tax on books and magazines had been removed (in 1967) by a new, centre-right, government. For magazines this was only temporary as a new and more comprehensive VAT system was introduced—by a centre-right government—in 1970, but in the meantime the funding of the system had come to be channelled directly through the state budget, which according to Ringdal (1993: 306) made the system more acceptable for the publishers. One could say that the field both ate their cake and had it too.

From the 1970s a number of policy advances followed. The original arrangement with life-long grants for previous merits was replaced with shorter support schemes for authors with new projects. The principle of redistribution was authorized, and the library compensation fund was introduced as a permanent chapter in the state budget as of 1976. The Library Compensation Fund Act accordingly came into force as of 1987 (Andreassen 2006: 37). In the 1970s, a new understanding of the concept of 'culture' was also implemented, defined as more than just 'elite' culture or fine arts. This more expansive understanding of culture, prepared by two consecutive governments and implemented by a Labour government in 1973–1974, has also played an important part in the subsequent democratization of literature. Resistance among librarians also waned relatively soon as the case for democratization gained more and more ground.

Expanding the arrangement

The new policy resulted in an immediate and enduring economic boost to the book industry and growth in the Norwegian literature. It soon turned out that the system worked too well to be limited to fiction writers. It has therefore over the years been expanded step by step, but not without combat. Non-fiction writers

⁴ There was also one minor one, based on religious literature.

⁵ This number has been changed as new genres have been introduced to the system.

had felt marginalized in the Norwegian Authors' Union from the start, and many were not even members (Andreassen 2006: 48). The profound bettering of the conditions for fiction writers in the 1960s and 1970s therefore led to a strong feeling of injustice. At the initiative of Bjørn Bjørnsen, a non-fiction writer who was astonished by the lack of support when he in the 1970s wrote two acclaimed documentary books, the Non-Fiction Association (NFFO) saw the light of day in 1978.

Already at the time the number of non-fiction writers by far outnumbered that of fiction writers, and the association soon grew to become the Norwegian writers' union with the most members (and also one of the largest unions of its kind in Europe, Andreassen 2006: 50). The unionization and ensuing sudden bargaining power of non-fiction writers subsequently posed a threat to fiction writers' interests, and led to a fight over the funds. The non-fiction writers started receiving library compensation fees the same year as NFFO was established, but at first this did not entail any fresh means (Andreassen 2006: 49).

One argument against including non-fiction writers in the arrangements was that non-fiction was inferior to fiction. This was a part of the quality discussion. An important aspect of this dispute was the marked difference in approach between the two major writers' unions (and accordingly also major actors in this cooperation between the state and civil society organizations). The fiction writers' association pursues strict quality control policies, and its membership figures have therefore always been limited.

Like its fiction predecessors,⁶ the non-fiction writers' union was formed to protect its members' interests, but membership was not based on quality criteria as such, beyond the requirement that the publications that lead to membership should be published with sufficient quality control. (In practice, this mostly means being published by established publishing houses.) This difference contributes to explaining the disagreements between the unions, as the more pragmatic membership policy of the non-fiction union could threaten to undermine the whole idea of a literary policy based on artistic qualities.

The non-fiction union on the other hand argued that its members, and in particular textbook authors, in reality were those who supplied publishers with the means necessary for publishing fiction. The debate was fierce: in the heat of battle both groups accused the other of being 'pickpockets' (Ringdal 1993: 424).

Another important difference is that the non-fiction union's basic function is to work for copyright holders. In a union with many textbook writers, loss of income due to photocopying was even more of a pressing problem than for their fiction counterparts. The non-fiction union soon started to campaign for copyright compensations, and in 1980 *Kopifag*, later *Kopinor*, was established (Andreassen 2006: 50). This grew into the organization that negotiates, on behalf of more

⁶ There are also unions for children's literature writers and playwrights.

than 20 member organizations, the size and direction of compensation for the reproduction of copyrighted material, both in print and digital versions. This soon became an achievement that also fiction writers benefitted from, but for non-fiction writers this is by far the most important part of the support scheme.

When it came to the question of a purchasing system, however, the stalemate lasted for another two decades. The system had been carefully expanded with fiction for children, translated fiction, non-fiction for children and even some essayistic writing, but the question of non-fiction was still very sensitive. As late as in 2001, the fiction authors' union described the demands from the non-fiction writers as a 'declaration of war' (Fidjestøl 2018: 24). Eventually, the parts came to the conclusion that it was crucial to work together instead of playing against each other. At the initiative of the Arts Council, which was in favour of expanding the system further, a cross-political organization called 'Action Extend the Purchasing System' was established. The director of the Arts Council discretely contacted the director of the publishing house Samlaget and former chairman of the board of the Norwegian Publishers' Association, Audun Heskestad, and suggested that he organize a lobbying campaign for the cause. Heskestad managed to gather the divided book industry around one common position, namely a purchasing scheme for non-fiction *in addition to* the current schemes (Fidjestøl 2018). In 2005, exactly 50 years after the introduction of a purchasing system for fiction, a system with a limited number of titles involved was introduced for non-fiction writers. Since then, selected picture books and comic books have also been brought into the system.

The disputes between those in favour of a further democratization of the system as opposed to those concerned for the artistic quality have continued also in later years. The most important of these emerged in 2017–2018, with a revolt among a group of fiction writers against the Authors' Union's control of who should have access to public support. This led to a new union, the Authors' Association, being established. As opposed to the Author's Union, the new association accepts all active members who have published one fiction book. The underlying conflict is therefore related to the older conflict between fiction and non-fiction writers. The result was eventually that the new Authors' Association was incorporated into the 'good company' and received its share of the compensation funds (Halvorsen 2020: 87).

The System's Impact

This system, and in particular the purchasing scheme, has been evaluated several times. What the evaluations have in common, is that they conclude that the policy works well and as intended (Bjerke 2020: 54ff.) Publishers and authors say unambiguously that the support schemes contribute to a predictability and

stability that allows the authors and their publishers to work with literature as *art* (Halvorsen et al. 2020; Slaatta and Rønning 2019), and not (only) as a commodity in a market. The literary policy has contributed to establishing literature in Norway as a separate autonomous field (Halvorsen 2020: 105). This strengthens the art logic's position in the field and ensures good quality of *national* literature. For non-fiction, the arguments for democracy and freedom of speech are just as important.

The system is, however, still far more developed for fiction literature. For non-fiction writers, the copy compensation fund is still more important than the purchasing scheme. NFFO has always been, and still is, the major receiver of the copy compensation funds—in 2020, for example, NFFO received six times more money from this fund than the fiction writers' organizations collected. The second most important scheme for non-fiction writers is the library compensation. The system has, on the whole, been very beneficial also to non-fiction writers. Over 6,000 books have been published as a result of the redistributive grants, and the number of new published titles has doubled in the last 15 years. In all, the tendency over at least the latest decade is that almost twice as many general non-fiction books as fiction (excluding textbooks for schools and universities) have been published each year. During the same period there have also been many other advances in Norwegian literary policy with regard to non-fiction—as, for example, with a number of publicly financed research projects, university courses and export strategies (Fonn et al. forthcoming).

Despite internal differences, the system appears to benefit the Norwegian literary system on the whole. This is also apparent when we compare it with imported literature, look at sales and library figures, and examine its international standing. To start with, Norway has currently five million inhabitants. In 2019, 323 new Norwegian fiction titles were released for adults and 226 for children. The corresponding figures for translated literature were 250 and 205. The difference between Norwegian-language and translated (general) non-fiction was even higher—557 to 219. The figures for Norwegian serial literature (161) and translated entertainment novels (102) are considerably lower.⁷

Furthermore, 1.2 million copies of Norwegian fiction books for adults were sold in the same year, compared to 674,000 translated. While sales of Norwegian fiction are stable, sales of printed translated fiction have almost been cut in half since 2015. The tendency is the same for children's books. In 2019, 1.3 million Norwegian fiction books for children were sold, whereas translated children's literature that used to have higher sales, had dropped to 1.3 million copies in five years. Furthermore, almost 2.1 million copies of Norwegian general non-fiction were sold in Norway in 2019, whereas under 750,000 sold titles were translated non-fiction.

⁷ https://forleggerforeningen.no/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Oppdatert_statistikk-30.6.21.pdf

Norwegians are energetic book readers. One in four Norwegians reports that they have read in a book on any given day; 41 per cent have read a book 'last week' (Statistisk Sentralbyrå 2021:16, 22). Alongside sales, library lending is the main distribution channel for books. The distribution of books purchased from the publishers through the procurement scheme ensures equal treatment of citizens across the country, an important Norwegian public-policy goal. This ensures both quality and diversity in the municipal book collections and is also popular with both borrowers and librarians. Norwegian public libraries lend out 17 million books annually (Halvorsen and Lien 2020: 392).

Furthermore, critically acclaimed and prize-winning Norwegian books dominate both sales and lending statistics (Halvorsen and Lien 2020: 393). This illustrates another important effect of the country's literary policy. Both Robert Escarpit and Pierre Bourdieu, two highly influential thinkers in the field of culture (and both of French origin), have described French literature as divided into two fully separated cycles of writers, publishers and readers: a 'highbrow' literature for the elite and a mass market literature for the larger population (Escarpit 1971; Bourdieu 2000). This is probably the case also in many other countries, and generally, international publishers are more often specialized with a clearer division between broad and narrow reader segments (Rønning and Slaatta 2019: 33–35). In Norway this affects *only translated literature* (Halvorsen et al. 2020: 463f.). The Norwegian policy has served to maintain a unified Norwegian literary field. The major and most renowned Norwegian publishers offer both niche and entertainment literature. Many of the authors who win the most important literary prizes also dominate the Norwegian sales and lending statistics, are celebrities in their own right, and participate in the most popular talk shows.

Norwegian authors also achieve considerable international success and are followed by literary agents, scouts and international publishers with increasing interest (Rønning and Slaatta 2019: 7). Over the last years, NORLA has regularly broken its own record when it comes to applications for translation support. After Norway was the Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2019 (in itself a sign of international recognition), Norwegian literature was translated into 48 different languages.⁸

Counternarratives

As we can see, the policy has attracted broad support, but the field is also rife with disagreements. Many of them have been solved en route, but some counternarratives have prevailed. The populist counternarrative criticizing the state spending

⁸ <https://norla.no/nb/nyheter/nyheter-fra-norla/2020-var-et-bemerkelsesverdige-godt-ar-for-norsk-litteratur-i-utlandet/>.

on niche literature, particularly poetry, has often been voiced, in later years particularly from the influential right-wing populist Progress Party (in a government coalition from 2013 to 2019), which is sceptical of most arts and cultural support.

Writers have, on the other hand, reiterated their worries that the system might encourage the publishing houses to take advantage of the benefits by approving manuscripts of poorer quality (Bjerke 2020: 54). Another possible lurking conflict is between different kinds of publishers, as it turns out that the major publishing houses benefit relatively far more from the system than the rest (Halvorsen et al. 2020). In all, neither of these concerns have so far gained much traction, but two other, themselves opposing, counternarratives have.

More liberalization and deregulation

Internationalization and liberalization of the culture markets have gone hand in hand with an enhanced pro-competition stance, in strong opposition to the counter-competitive measures of the Book Treaty. The liberalization argument is that the system of fixed prices on new books jeopardizes the market mechanism by reducing the competition in the book market—which it obviously does—but the political disagreement is based on whether this is regarded as a problem or not. This narrative has a kinship with earlier conservative/ right-wing objections, and has surfaced once in a while, but until the early 1990s, no strong actor championed it (Fjeldstad 1993).

This changed in 1994 with the replacement of two important corporatist economic institutions, the Price Directorate and the Price Council, with the new anti-trust-oriented Norwegian Competition Authority. According to a recent Minister of Culture and a prominent parliamentarian of the last decades, the competition authority championed the liberal market narrative against the system of fixed book prices from day one. According to our interviewee, this has had little or no effect, and the solid political support for the Book Treaty has so far prevailed.⁹

It does, however, not exist in isolation of broader developments in trade and cultural policy. In 1997 the Publishers' Association terminated the trade agreement. Over the next few years, new and more liberalizing trade agreements were negotiated. In the 1999 trade agreement both the mandatory duty to list all releases and the fixed discounts were reduced. In 2005, the Conservative Party's Ministry of Modernization further liberalized the book agreement by allowing the bookstores to sell books at up to a 12.5 per cent discount.

As a result of these changes, the diversity in bookstores has shrunk considerably over the last 20 years. According to Cecilie Naper, a leading Norwegian researcher

⁹ Interview with Trine Skei Grande, 8 June 2021.

in the field, translated commercial publications of more limited literary value have started to take a big bite at the expense of the award-winning literature. Historically, the lending figures at the libraries have mirrored the sales figures from the bookstore, and this appears to be the case also today.¹⁰

Since 2000, publishing houses have also merged and bought bookselling chains. The store chains are increasingly governed by commercial considerations. In Naper's view, the changes have been so grave that the informal contract between the state and the industry is threatened.¹¹ The growth of international net retailers (Amazon) and the entertainment industry has also contributed to putting the more 'idealistic' function of the retailers under pressure. Time for book reading is furthermore limited when the consumers/public can choose from several TV streaming services (Netflix, HBO, The Norwegian Broadcasting Company (NRK)).

At the same time the market for Norwegian books still features robust demand for high-quality literature. Among the stacks in the bookstores we find not only cookery books, celebrities, romance and crime fiction, but also healthy proportions of Norwegian fiction and non-fiction written by award-winning authors as well as new and interesting voices. Naper puts it this way based on her own research: 'The good literature we read is Norwegian literature' (Haagensen 2020: 38–39). It is also important to note that the 'quality' translated literature is often published by niche publishers with support from the Arts Council Norway and other non-commercial funding. This also underlines the very importance of the literary policy.

An exception from the general trend towards more deregulation took place when a centre-left government in 2013 adopted a strengthening of the current regime by replacing the book agreement with a book law (with fixed prices, among other things), but when a new centre-right majority came into office later that year, the Book Act was scrapped. In 2014, the mandatory listing was also taken out of the agreement altogether.

In 2020, the pro-competition stance gained momentum, as the Norwegian Competition Authority warned that it considered imposing fines of NOK 502 million in total on four major publishers and the book database company Bokbasen for having shared information about future book prices and the timing of book releases. The Competition Authority contends that these actors thus have 'cooperated illegally by sharing competitive sensitive information.'¹² The allegations are disputed—the publishers claim both that the information is publicly

¹⁰ The share of bookstores that carried all purchasing literature dropped from 70 per cent to between 35 and 40 per cent 20 years later. The share of *fully assorted* bookstores at the time has dropped from 20 to 5 per cent in the same period. *Morgenbladet* 18.9.20

¹¹ *Morgenbladet* 18.9.2020

¹² <https://konkurransetilsynet.no/considers-imposing-fines-on-five-companies-in-the-book-market-totalling-nok-502-million/?lang=en/>.

available and a tool for bookstores and libraries—and the case is not solved. The case can, however, be seen as an example of ‘politics by other means’, as it illustrates how the ideal of ‘the invisible hand’ threatens the more visible hands of the democratic–corporative model.

More state interference

The other counternarrative relates to the arm’s length principle. With the introduction and de facto implementation of the arm’s length principle in the 1960s, most of those who were sceptic of the role of the state were relieved. Later, the concern for the role of the state was again brought to the fore. As we have seen, all schemes were established at a time when a democratic–corporate tripartite cooperation was a key model for public governance. The organizations in a field had a decisive influence in their area, and solutions were often found as a result of negotiations between the parties—as was the case, for example, with the purchasing scheme.

During the 1990s a counternarrative to the principle of the arm’s length re-emerged among leading Social Democratic politicians. The counter argument was that the Arts Council Norway could not operate on its own and should take on the role as the state’s prolonged arm (Mangset and Hylland 2017: 224–225). In the next two decades, the debate over the role of the Arts Council followed a left–right axis in the political landscape. According to Fidjestøl (2015), the result was that the Arts Council developed into a little more of a directorate. In recent years this trend has accelerated under the new centre-right government, paving the way for exactly a kind of state micro-management for the literary policy, following more administrative, bureaucratic principles.

In this process, the negotiable elements in the Arts Council’s support schemes have been weakened. The Arts Council now *points out* members of the literature assessment committee, and more comprehensive criteria have been introduced for assessments committees’ work (Bjerke 2020: 68f.). The centre-right government had also tried to replace the field’s own grant committees with committees appointed by the minister, so far, unsuccessfully.

A Policy Success?

In this part we will examine the results of Norwegian literary policy in the light of McConnell’s (2010) and this volume’s PPPE assessments framework, which distinguishes separate criteria sets for ‘programmatic’, ‘process’, ‘endurance’ and ‘political’ success. It should be noted that we primarily assess the success of the

system on its own terms, on the basis of its own ambitions, its ability to endure over time, and a high legitimacy among its stakeholders.

Programme success

So far, all research-based evaluations have found that the system has met its goals. The purpose of literature policy has been and remains to ensure that national Norwegian literature of high quality is written, published, distributed and read. Thus, the support schemes have ‘created benefits for several target groups’ (McConnell: 354) such as authors, publishers, libraries and readers. Research findings that support us talking about either programmatic ‘success’ or ‘resilient success’ are high levels of production and consumption of national quality literature.

At this point neither political opponents nor the influential Norwegian Competition Authority have been able to change the general perception of the scheme to ensure that literature policy objectives are created to guarantee that a varied and good national literature is produced (and that higher bestseller prices are an acceptable price to pay).

Process and endurance success

The various parts of Norwegian literary policy were introduced and are maintained through political processes in a way that falls between ‘complete’ and ‘resilient’ success (McConnell 2010: 352). The main elements were developed in an alliance between politicians from most parties and the organizations in the field. There were some disagreements before the purchase scheme was introduced, but all these were resolved through laws, and both Labour and centre-right governments were involved in amending the system.

There were also disagreements about the book agreement, which has demanded exemptions from competition legislation ever since 1962. Largely, the regulations have been weakened and competition considerations have gained more and more weight. At this particular point, it is most reasonable to talk about a ‘conflicted success’, that is, ‘that revisions have been needed’ (McConnell 2010: 352) over the years.

On the other hand, the centre-right majority in the Norwegian parliament (which by 2021 had ruled the country for eight years) has accepted the basic principles of the literary politics, and the opposition to the literary policy remains weak, which is well symbolized by the fact that one of the Conservative Party’s central cultural politicians was hired as a lobbyist for the Publishers’ Association in

2021.¹³ A prominent conservative cultural politician and parliamentarian describes an ongoing discussion within the Conservative Party between advocates for stability and for change in the literary policy. In his opinion, the former still represents the majority, mainly due to a common understanding of the current literary policy regime as successful.¹⁴

The corporatist nature of the literary policy has also allowed a wide range of stakeholders to be heard. This has contributed to a gradual democratization of the literary policy by many means, also by expanding the book purchasing scheme to new types of literature.

Political success

Politically, literary politics seems essentially to ‘enhance electoral prospects or reputations’ (McConnell 2010: 356). The best evidence of that is that the various support schemes have been largely fixed regardless of government. All players in the field defend the schemes collectively and strongly; internal criticism is hit hard upon (Bjerke 2020). The attempt to deprive the artist organizations of power over the grants in 2017 was, for example, given up due to massive opposition. This showed that it was not possible for the government to ‘control the policy agenda’ if it wanted significant changes. *Defending* and expanding the schemes, on the other hand, are more politically feasible.

Long opposed, the publishing industry has come to accept the rationale of the policy. In the Publishers’ Association’s annual statistics report for 2019, chairman Edmund Austigard puts it this way:

Norwegian literature has never had as many readers in Norway and abroad as just now. Turnover may be visible in the (Statistics), but that goal represents barely a fraction of the larger cultural value; all what literature means for free speech, diversity, our language, our reading, education and the people’s government. The fact that what we do is relevant to people means value creation, and makes Norway richer in many ways. It is this knowledge that the Norwegian literary system is founded on. And with that comes our community contract (our transl.)¹⁵

The political success of the system may in all represent a warning against too strong commercialization of the industry. At one point, a Labour Minister of Culture expressed this in clear terms: ‘If the book industry only wants to think as

¹³ <https://forleggerforeningen.no/nyhetsarkiv/bjorgulv-vinje-borgundvaag-til-forleggerforeningen/>.

¹⁴ Interview with Tage Pettersen, 21 June 2021.

¹⁵ Bransjestatistikk_2019_internet-v2.pdf (forleggerforeningen.no)/.

grocery retailers, they are free to do so, but in Norway grocery stores pay VAT' (Trond Giske in *Nationen*, 3 June 2008).

Cultural policy has always been justified by something outside or larger than itself. When in recent years the rationale for cultural policy has been adjusted from 'defence of nation and language' to defence of 'democracy and freedom of expression', this reflects a change in the general political discourse. The defence of language and nation is perceived as problematic by large voter groups, especially among urban Liberals. Democracy and freedom of expression, on the other hand, have universal support among Norwegian voters, and the change can therefore be seen as a desire to maintain cultural policy, but give it a new justification. In other words, paraphrasing McConnell (2010: 356), some refinement was needed, but the broad trajectory proceeded unimpeded.

A Literary Welfare State

Norway's literary policy is one element of the Nordic Model (Rønning and Slaatta 2019). Syvertsen et al. (2014: 2) have argued that a specific trait of the Nordic countries is not only their emphasis on economic and social welfare, but that they are what can be called Media Welfare States, based on 'universal services, editorial freedom, a cultural policy for the media, and a tendency to choose policy solutions that are consensual and durable, based on consultation with both public and private stakeholders'. What Syvertsen et al. have in mind is news media, whereas we have concentrated on aspects pertaining to the creation, production, distribution and consumption of the book medium, both fiction and non-fiction. It is our conviction that this represents a Norwegian literary welfare state, with similarities, but also differences from the news media field.

During the last 30 years, many sectors related to the cultural field have been liberalized and marketized in Norway as in other Nordic countries—like media, communication, telecom, etc. The corporative elements in the cultural field are still much stronger than in many of these related fields. The reason is that the cultural field has been viewed as 'different', with other and broader goals. This is also the case in the EU, which legal frameworks Norway in practice became dependent on after having entered the European Economic Area in 1994.

On the other hand, the literary field bears many similarities to the media field in interesting ways. The support for literature has always had more of a character of 'a little to many' than in other cultural fields, where the principle has been more of 'a lot to the few'. This is evident from the quite extensive redistributive nature of the system, and it has been strengthened by the many extensions. In recent decades, it has also drawn more on arguments for freedom of expression and diversity, and in that way, the literary support is more similar to the support of the media than to the support of, for example, visual art.

In sum, the case of literary policy can be seen as emblematic for the Nordic model at least in the following three ways:

First, when the main features of the Norwegian literary policy were established, Norwegian and Nordic politics were characterized by what in recent media research is called democratic–corporatist solutions (Hallin et al. 2004.). At that time social science concepts like ‘corporative pluralism’ (Rokkan 1966) and ‘negotiated economy’ (Berrefjord et al. 1989) were used. This both strengthened the likelihood of a public literary policy and had an impact on the design of literature policies. The main rationale behind democratic–corporate solutions is to develop a policy that takes care of a variety of considerations at once. It is also not only a question of combining different measures, but also about resolving conflicts by establishing a *mutual understanding* between stakeholders (Berrefjord et al. 1988: 11). In the field of literature, the design was able to bridge the interest of authors, publishing houses, booksellers, libraries and politicians.

Second, the case is related to the position of cultural policy in Norwegian politics and society. The policy is closely linked to a strong public focus on identity, language and culture. Norway was a young nation when the policy was introduced, and also relatively recently under German occupation (1940–1945). *Nation-building* has, probably more than in other Nordic countries, been a central political issue for all political factions in Norway, but is closely tied to democratization. Literature has been perceived as a central part of this. Parts of the cultural policies are also related to another distinct feature of Norwegian politics where nation-building has been translated into policies with a typical Nordic model nature, as the strong position of district policy and a goal of equal public services throughout the country. This is a political goal with strong support in Norway, last seen as a revitalization of the urban–periphery conflict dimension ahead of the election in 2021.

Third, the literature support scheme is related to the Nordic egalitarian traditions. The schemes are organized as *redistribution of revenue* (from bestseller-authors to all authors), although it should be said that the majority of Norwegian writers still have a very modest income (Heian et al. 2015). The flip side is that many authors enjoy broad recognition both within and beyond Norway.

Concluding Remarks

In all, Norwegian literary policy has broad popular and political support. People read books, use libraries, etc. Successful adaptation to changes internally and externally has helped to preserve its political and popular standing. Democratization of literature quite simply seems to have been a successful adaptation to an expanded cultural concept from national concerns to democracy and diversity as the goal. It is also important that the scheme—as we have described—*works*. An

important success factor and a backbone in the system is a receiving apparatus in the form of libraries that the public attends, values and trusts. Another important factor is that the main stakeholders have by and large strongly supported the policy, and that the support schemes have survived all governmental coalitions since the start. Later the system has been extended as new arrangements have been added on ‘top of’ the old.

However, in later years, general developments regarding both market organization and public administration have fuelled two counternarratives, and even if the support schemes seem to be robust, two of these may cause further public discussions.

First, the market liberal position is deeply sceptical toward the system. So far this has primarily manifested itself in the form of attacks on the price agreements embedded in the system. Secondly, in later years, the public management logic has strengthened its positions at the expense of the traditional art logic. Paradoxically, the system may therefore be threatened both by the idea of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market and the state’s wish to prolong its arm.

Finally, one of the most important defences against changes in the literature policy so far has been a united front of actors in the literary field, but of late there is more internal debate about the desirability, fairness and unintended consequences of the scheme.

And then there is the disruptive impact of technology on the publishing business. All support schemes are print based, so the regulations for digital publications have copied the rules for paper. Audiobooks—and especially streaming services—have been difficult to incorporate seamlessly into existing schemes. The only exception is the VAT exemption, which in 2019 was also introduced for audio books and streaming services. But there is no purchasing scheme for the libraries and no fixed price. No purchasing scheme has been introduced for physical or downloadable audio books, and when it comes to the rapidly growing streaming market, no agreements have been reached between the authors and the publishers. Several publishers, furthermore, do not sell digital versions to libraries. Lawsuits are currently pending between authors and publishers regarding streaming services—as the field has simply not been able to gather around a solution for this new, popular format (Bjerke and Halvorsen 2020: 359ff). If the agents in the literature field are not able to stay in line, the literature policies might not survive.

Could this policy ‘travel’ to other countries? There are probably no formal limitations to implementing key parts of Norwegian literary politics in other European countries. While EU regulations do not allow anti-competitive state aid, exceptions are made for parts of the cultural sector. The EU has, for example, accepted that ‘fixed price regulations in the form of a book law, are accepted, as it is a cultural policy law, and therefore a national concern.’ VAT exemptions for literature and compensation schemes for library use and copying have also been accepted according to EU directive 92/100/EEC (Larsen et al. 2012). As explained, the

political parties and the majority of voters shared a positive attitude towards redistribution and equality. It is not necessarily the case that this would be present in all countries with other socio-political landscapes. On the other hand, over the last 40 years, market solutions have been tried in many respects, and the market has proved to be unable to solve a wide variety of multidimensional societal challenges. If the desired outcome is, as has been the case in Norway, to promote and democratize literature in a small-language nation, there is no evidence that leaving the task to the market would be the best recipe for reaching that goal.

Questions for discussion

1. In what way can a literary policy like the Norwegian policy contribute to democracy and diversity?
2. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of state support of literary production?
3. What are the main advantages and disadvantages of supporting the producers of literature directly?
4. In what way can the Norwegian literary policy be said to be an element of the Nordic Model?
5. What developments trends can contribute to weakening or strengthening policies like the Norwegian literary policy in the future?

Links to online resources

https://www.norskeserier.no/_the-tools-of-literary-politics-helge-ronning-tore-slaatta-9788230402603/.

Home—NORLA:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286632.2018.1500560/>.

https://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/works/books/Even-Zohar_1990—Polysystem%20studies.pdf/.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10286632.2015.1084297/>.

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