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The politics of organizing indigenous sport – cross-border and cross-sectoral complexity

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ABSTRACT

Research Question: The authors studied the complexity surrounding the organization of sport in nations without nation-state status, exploring three research questions: (1) How do representatives of Sámi sport organizations in Finland and Norway perceive and act upon the proposal to reorganize Sámi sport? (2) How do representatives of the Sámi parliaments in Finland and Norway perceive and act upon the proposal to reorganize Sámi sport? (3) How do representatives of the state bureaucracy in Finland perceive and act upon the proposal to reorganize Sámi sport?

Research Methods: We interviewed representatives of the Sámi parliaments and Sámi sport in Norway and Finland, an external consultant in Norway and a state official of Finland constituting a total of eight key actor interviews.

Results and Findings: The analysis revealed the dominant role of the Norwegian side of Sámi sport, largely based on the institutional power of the Sámi parliament in Norway. In that respect, voluntary sport organizations in both Finland and Norway were reluctant to consider or were even negative towards an ongoing reorganization of Sámi sport since it was initiated by the Norwegian authorities and by the Norwegian Sámi parliament.

Implications: Decision-makers in government agencies involved in cross-border and cross-sectoral issues should consider the opinions of all parties involved. Moreover, concerning indigenous groups striving for self-determination in post-colonial contexts, it is important to create a unified voice in matters important to the group as a collective.

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Introduction

In this study we examine the complexity surrounding the organization of sport in nations without nation-state status (such as Kurdistan, Australian Aboriginals and North American First Nations). We conduct an analysis of sport politics across countries and across sectors, following an initiative launched by the Sámi parliament in Norway (in 2015) to restructure the organization of Sámi sport. Thus, we show how such an initiative by a

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public sector organization subordinate to one specific nation-state has implications for public sector organizations and voluntary organizations in other countries. The context in which this takes place is Sápmi – the land of the Sámi. Sámi are the indigenous people of the North Calotte, inhabiting four countries: The Kola Peninsula of Russia, and northern parts of Finland, Sweden and Norway. The three latter have Sámi parliaments with authority in some political matters. The Sámi population is estimated at about 2000 in Russia, 10,000 in Finland (of which more than 60% live outside the Sámi homeland), 20,000 in Sweden and 40–60,000 in Norway (Sámi parliament-F, *n.d.*)

In a study of the role of sport organizations in the local and national community, Skille and Fahlén (2020) showed how representatives of Sámi sport clubs in Norway connect to a Sámi national community through their local Sámi communities. They emphasized the role of sport organizations in the establishment and perception of local and national communities in indigenous populations. More specifically, they pinpointed the importance of sport clubs as community organizations at the local level and how they function as a link to the Sámi national community through affiliation with the Sámi sport organization. However, this has some limitations of which two specifically form the outset for the present study. First, a distinctive feature of sport in the Nordic countries is that sport organizations are solely voluntary organizations and that the public sector has no sport organizations (Fahlén & Ferry, 2019; Green et al., 2019; Koski et al., 2019; Seippel & Skille, 2019; Skille & Fahlén, 2020). However, focusing on voluntary sport organizations in the civil sector, the complex relationship between third sector sport organizations and governmental (public sector) organizations is overlooked. The second limitation is the authors' narrow empirical focus on a single nation-state (Norway) which is especially problematic considering that the Sámi nation comprises three other nation-states. In addressing these limitations, we pay heed to calls for studies into 'other countries of Sápmi due to contrasting population sizes and legal status of Sámi throughout Sápmi' (Skille & Fahlén, 2020, p. 14).

Sámi sport is structured in organizations in each country (Finland, Sweden, Norway), and with a Nordic level umbrella organization uniting these three country specific organizations. This fragmentation is the background to the recent initiative launched by the Sámi parliament in Norway to restructure the organization of Sámi sport (Sámi parliament-N, 2015). The formative moment sparking off the initiative was the divided reindeer racing community that was considered ill-suited for the development of one of the core Sámi sport events. According to the Sámi parliament council (in Norway), the solution with two reindeer racing organizations 'is not beneficial, and the council observes that this organization has not been the best for the development of reindeer racing as a sport' (Sámi parliament-N, 2015, p. 5). The motives were framed by financial arguments:

Today's organization, and especially the role of the Sámi parliament, [is] less beneficial. The council is of the opinion that the sports' own units/organizations should have a more active role in the distribution of the economic tools made available for Sámi sport. According to the Sámi parliament council's judgement, it would be beneficial with a model where the Sámi parliament and one umbrella organization for Sámi sport through annual negotiations reach an overall agreement in which content and economic recourses are specified. (Sámi parliament-N, 2015, p. 6)

As our aim is to understand the complexity surrounding the organization of sport in nations without nation-state status, we specifically investigated how the reorganization

is perceived and acted upon by representatives of the organizations involved in Finland and Norway (Sámi sport organizations, Sámi parliaments, and governmental organizations). While other studies have discussed legitimation of state sport policy in general (Strittmatter et al., 2018) and how legitimation of state sport policy in Nordic countries impacts Sámi sport (Skille et al., 2021), the specific research questions guiding this paper are:

1. How do representatives of Sámi sport organizations in Finland and Norway perceive and act upon the proposal to reorganize Sámi sport?
2. How do representatives of the Sámi parliaments in Finland and Norway perceive and act upon the proposal to reorganize Sámi sport?
3. How do representatives of the state administration in Finland perceive and act upon the proposal to reorganize Sámi sport?

The rationale underlying the sample is outlined in the Methods section, which follows the context description and theory sections. Taken together, the Context section that outlines the conditions for Sámi, historically, and politically and organizationally today, and the Theoretical framework section combining institutional and interactionist theories, provide the study's approach. In that respect, the study's contribution to the field of neo-institutional sport management research focusing on legitimation and myths, is the application of such theories in a postcolonial context. Then we move on to exploring empirically and discussing analytically, the recent proposal to reorganize Sámi sport.

Historical developments and contemporary context

Ski competitions between Sámi schools in Sweden marked the birth of organized Sámi sport and were simultaneously the forerunner to the establishment of the first designated Sámi sport organization in 1948 – the Swedish Sámi Sports Organization, – based on a perceived need for a separate organization for Sámi sport (Kuorak, 2015; SVL-N, 2007). In comparison, Finnish and Norwegian sports organizations were established in the middle of the nineteenth century (Finland, 1856; Norway, 1861). In 1979, a joint Sámi sport organization was founded (Pedersen & Rafoss, 1989); and in 1990 today's confederate structure – SVL (the Sámi abbreviation for the Sámi sports organization) – was established and affiliated with the Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish organizations (SVL-N, 2007). Although the establishment of SVL marked the starting point for more organized cooperation across borders, the period leading up to its inauguration and the years after was characterized by tension. Illustrative of this is quote from the SVL-N website:

SVL Sámiid Valáštallanlihttu was established in 1979. In this Sámi federation the Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian organizations were members. They should initiate specific sports for the Sámi. However, this did not function as planned and was unmanageable and difficult to organize throughout the three countries (SVL-N, 2007).

One explanation for the tensions is that Sámi sport has few members, little activity and poor organization. Moreover, 'the two joint Nordic federations – the SVL and SSL [Sámi football association] – have been dominated by the Norwegians from the 1990s to the

present day' and 'the SVL-N has to a large extent functioned as a separate association independent of the joint Nordic association, SVL' (Pedersen, 2011, p. 46). The Norwegian dominance stems from demography and the relationship to the public sector.

The dominance of Norwegian Sápmi in Sámi sport can be ascribed to the fact that the largest percentage of the Sámi lives in Norway, and that the associations' economy and activities have largely depended on grants from the Norwegian Sámi parliament and other Norwegian authorities (Pedersen, 2011, pp. 46–47).

Situating the politics of organizing indigenous sport in a broader context requires a brief note on contemporary institutional arrangements surrounding the policy–sport organization nexus. First and foremost, it is important to understand that the Nordic context is characterized by social-democratic traditions in politics (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010; Green et al., 2019). Dating back almost a century, this has resulted in a model often referred to as the 'Scandinavian way' which was built on the egalitarian values in vogue across Europe at the time. The Scandinavian way of devising policy based on these values was to engineer interaction between financial and social policy in which general social security systems counteracted rapid market fluctuations (Siminon, 1985). By increasing income-, heritage-, and property-taxes, large-scale infrastructural projects in housing, electrification and transport as well as socio-political reforms were implemented. Through such reforms, the state sought to act as a redistributor of wealth by increasing demand and employment, aiming to provide all citizens with reasonable standards of living (Norborg, 1993). Combined with the economic growth that legitimized and allowed their implementation, this came to characterize the emerging welfare state. Although this wide-ranging development project was very much state-driven, voluntary and membership-based club sport was given a leading role in the promotion of public health and democracy at an early stage (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016), symbolizing the Scandinavian 'take' on welfare (i.e. not limited to health care and schools but including citizen's access to recreation activities).

Still today, this take on welfare has implications for how voluntary club sport is funded and organized in the sense that it expresses the governments' far-reaching ambitions enabling citizens to access recreation and meaningful leisure, along with the aim of doing so via organized sport (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010). As previously mentioned, the main argument today concerns the alleged ability of sport to cost-effectively reduce healthcare costs, promote social integration and challenge norm-breaking behavior (Österlind & Fahlén, 2015). Notwithstanding these characteristics, one of the more important features of voluntary-organized, non-profit club sport in the Nordic countries has been, and still is, its size, propagation, and centralized organizational structure (Green et al., 2019). This has facilitated both funding and implementation of social policy but also limited the possibilities for other actors to benefit from funding and have a voice in policy-making (Fahlén & Skille, 2016, 2017; Skille, 2012; Skille & Fahlén, 2020). It should be noted however, that although the Scandinavian way or the Nordic model are useful concepts for describing the broader contours, national differences become visible on closer inspection.

In Finland, the state has taken a more prominent role as a coordinator of sport, especially regarding funding (Lehtonen, 2017; Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2020). Sport organizations are, however, very much involved in implementing sport policy, resulting in the

Finnish system being regarded as a mixed model between state and sport movement (Henry, 2009; Lehtonen & Mäkinen, 2020). The basic structure organizing voluntary club sport is similar to its neighboring countries' though. Almost all sports clubs – around 10,000 with approximately 1.1 million members – form the backbone of grass-roots level sport while simultaneously being members of national sport federations which, in turn, are members of the National Olympic Committee. The state sport budget is almost entirely (99.5%) sourced from National Lottery funds amounting to some €150 million in recent years (MEC, 2017). Of these funds, one-third is directed to the 120–130 national and regional sport organizations associated in the civic sector. Sport clubs are funded by the municipalities, amounting to some €50 million per year. Regarding Sámi sport in Finland specifically, only one Sámi sport club exists (Anára Sámisearvi), which organizes the traditional Sámi sports (e.g. lassoing and reindeer racing) and other sports such as football and floorball (indoor land hockey), and also Sámi culture activities for its approximately 100 members. Sámi people are mostly members of conventional sport clubs. The SVL-F does not receive any state funding because the number of Sámi sport clubs is too low, and that Sámi sport is more of a cultural activity rather than a conventional sport organized in national sport federations. Instead, the main financial support for Sámi sport comes as project funding by the Sámi parliament directed to participation in the Arctic Winter Games (AWG).

In Norway, sport organizations are kept at arm's length from the state with a specified division of labor: the public sector is responsible for building facilities and the voluntary sport organizations arrange activities. The 11,500 sport clubs (with 2.2 million individual memberships) constituting the base of the pyramid are affiliated to 54 national sport federations that in turn are federated in The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF). NIF holds a monopolistic status regarding state subsidies to voluntary-organized, non-profit club sport. The state budget for sport – stemming from the state lottery revenues – is approximately €290 million, of which 160 million are located to facilities, 110 million are distributed to NIF and its affiliated organizations (i.e. sport clubs), and the rest is to be used to a number of smaller budget posts such as anti-doping projects, research, and, since 2005, €150.000 for subsidies to Sámi sport (Kulturdepartementet, 2019). Approximately half (16/30) of the registered clubs in SVL-N are sport clubs (Skille, 2019). All but one are also members of NIF. The remaining registered clubs (14) are Sámi associations and/or specific reindeer racing units. The total membership number of SVL-N is less than 4000 and among them about 300 practice the unique Sámi sports reindeer racing and lassoing (SVL-N, 2018).

Concluding these contextual descriptions, Figure 1 shows the relevant organizations in Finland and Norway. Apart from mentioned actors, Sámi sport has also (albeit to a various extent) connections to the specific Sámi parliament installed in the respective country. Their overarching purpose is to provide the Sámi populations with some self-determination and to function as an advisory organ to the national parliament in each country. Moreover, Figure 1 shows the Sámi Parliamentary Council, the coordinating body for the country-based Sámi parliaments (green, state-crossing box), and the dominant sport system in each country. Figure 1 also foreshadows the potential position of the new organizational actor described in the introduction of this paper (red, state-crossing box).

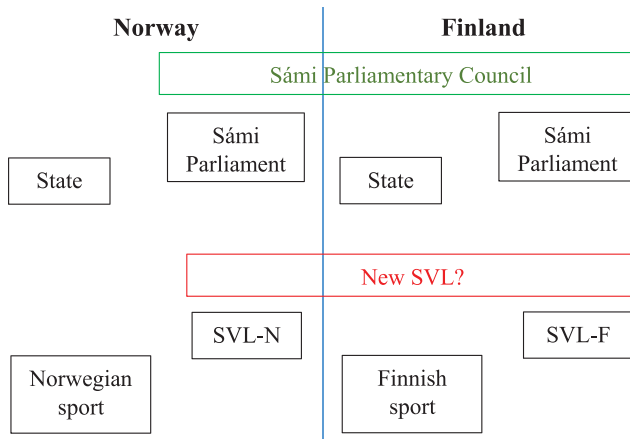


Figure 1. The organization of Sámi sport in Norway and Finland.

Theoretical framework

Given the context and our aim to understand the complexity of issues crossing sectors and crossing borders, we apply a theoretical approach focusing on how institutions form frameworks for defining legitimate action through rationalization. Since the seminal work of Meyer and Rowan (1977), neo-institutionalists have shown that legitimacy develops and sustains through ‘myths’. Such myths function as rationalized structures that ‘are deeply ingrained in, and reflect, widespread understandings of social reality’ (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 343). The legitimacy of myths is commonly taken-for-granted and unquestioned, and ‘binding on particular organizations’ (Meyer & Rowan 1977, p. 343). Organizations’ pursuit of legitimacy by conforming to institutionalized myths often result in conformity across organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As such, neo-institutionalists argue that although it allows for a focus on organizations’ internal strategy, it places greater emphasis on external pressure. One mechanism behind the conforming to institutionalized myths is that organizations consider changes in their environment and adopt institutional mechanisms from successful organizations in the field. By that, organizations are involved in and contribute to isomorphic processes (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which simultaneously point to how agency is implicit in an institutional perspective, since it is human action that establishes, maintains and erodes institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Agency in organizations is manifest in how people engage in purposeful action while drawing upon taken-for-granted meanings (Everitt & Levinson, 2016). By making sense of institutionalized myths, individuals in organizations unintentionally reaffirm the legitimacy of rationalized structures as they are socialized to perform prospective roles in specific institutional environments. This institutional process refers to the ways in which individuals actively make, keep, and discontinue institutions ‘[I]nstitutions rely on the action of individuals and organizations for their reproduction over time’ (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215). At the same time though, as Blumer (1969, p. 19) argues

[A]n institution does not function automatically because of some inner dynamics or system requirements; it functions because people at different points do something, and what they do is a result of how they define the situation in which they are called on to act.

Thus, in order to be able to account for both structure and agency in the understanding of organizational behavior, empirical research must identify relationships between people's sense-making and the reproduction of prevailing institutional myths.

This, in turn, brings interactionist perspectives into the analysis of how institutions shape action. The processes of 'recoupling' institutional myths occur when individuals negotiate and question the myth's legitimacy – and make 'turmoil' – before redefining them (Hallett, 2010). While a more traditional neo-institutional approach would anticipate threats to the perceived legitimacy of myths, an interactionist perspective sees interaction among individuals as the creation of meaning of institutions and their rationalized myths for everyday activities. Hence, inhabited institutionalism 'draws attention to these settings as locales for reproducing and revising prevailing institutional myths' (Hallett, 2010, p. 70). By taking this theoretical stance, we contribute to the understanding of how local revisions of institutional myths are sense-making responses to institutional demands (Binder, 2007).

Methods

Inspired by interpretative phenomenology, the primary data-collection method employed was interviews with eight purposively sampled key actors aiming at generating as much relevant information about the topic as possible (Bryman, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Given the 'direction' of the initiative of changing Sámi sport organization, the key persons identified differed in Norway and Finland. We excluded Russia from the study because no Sámi sport organization exists there. Moreover, indigenous groups' rights are severely restricted by the government on a broader scale, further aggravating communication with Sámi representatives in Russia. In Sweden, contacts were made with representatives of the organizations in question who all declined participation. A rudimentary non-response analysis indicates that this might have something to do with the delicate character of the issue in focus. In Norway, we conducted five interviews; with a politician in the Sámi parliament responsible for sport, two employees in the Sámi parliament bureaucracy working with preparing and implementing sport policy, an external consultant (commissioned by the Sámi parliament to conduct the initiative under study), and an employee in the SVL-N administration. In Finland, we conducted three interviews with representatives of the Sport Unit of the Ministry of Education and Culture, Sámi parliament and Sámi sport organization of Finland (SVL-F).

The study followed the guidelines of research ethics; all interviewees participated voluntarily on an informed consent basis, with the possibility to withdraw at any time, and with guaranteed anonymity. The interviews were performed by the first and second authors in their respective countries, using their native language, following the same interview guide. It was constructed around four general topics regarding (Sámi) sport organization and politics: (i) the organization of Sámi sport, (ii) the state's sport policy, (iii) the state's Sámi policy, and (iv) the Sámi parliament's sport policy, and a

fifth topic (v) focusing on the proposed reorganization in particular. The interview used exploratory and open-ended questions, such as ‘What do you know about the reorganization of Sámi sport? Please elaborate’, and followed up with probes such as ‘Who initiated it?’, ‘How did you receive the information about it?’, ‘How have you in [your organization] perceived and acted upon the reorganization?’ We also posed some questions regarding the fact that different states and types of organizations (public and voluntary) were involved, such as ‘How does collaboration in SVL work across state borders?’ Interviews were conducted via telephone or face-to-face (workplace, hotel) as preferred by the interviewee, and lasted between 45 and 75 min.

After transcribing the interviews (the Finnish into English, and the Norwegian in the original),¹ we conducted a five-step analysis (Giorgi, 2012; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008) in order to describe and analyze the phenomenon: the reorganization. Step 1 consists of becoming familiarized with the data and taking notes. All authors performed step 1 independently of each other, and then met for the initial planning of the paper. In doing so, we found the need to triangulate some of the information (Yin, 2009) and therefore decided to include two documents in the dataset: the Sámi parliament in Norway’s report on Sámi sport, and the report from the external consultancy company aiding the Sámi parliament in the reorganization process. Step 2 involves searching for meaning-units in the data to construct patterns, including marking relevant phrases in the transcripts. Step 3 consists of transforming the orally expressed words in the interviewees into written expressions and drafting a text. These steps were also conducted independently by the three authors, who then again met for discussion. Step 4, selecting quotations from the transcripts to be included in the manuscript, was initially performed by the first author who constructed a preliminary draft before meeting again for discussions and subsequent revisions. In step 5, we engaged with extant research and theoretical perspectives, following a structural hermeneutic methodology (Alexander & Smith, 2001).

Results

To seek an understanding of the organization of sport in nations without nation-state status, we focus on the phenomenon of the reorganization. We first present results descriptively in order to reveal the opinions and tensions that are directed specifically towards the research questions regarding how representatives of the organizations in the two countries view the reorganization process.

The descriptive version

In 2007, a fracture in the reindeer racing community in SVL-N caused the establishment of a separate reindeer racing organization detached from the original one, SHL (Sámi abbreviation for the Reindeer racing association). SHL had members from Norway, Finland and Sweden (consultant report) and by that took on a united Sápmi profile, not limited to any of the nation-states. Its establishment was based on the lack of possibilities to crown a Sámi champion (since the existing reindeer racing organization was limited to one of the district sport organizations (e.g. SVL-N)). While the SVL-N

organized Norwegian reindeer racing championships, SHL organized Sámi championships. This dual organization was challenging and led to frustration among participants. One

had to pay membership in SHL to start in the world cup earlier this year. After his reindeer crossed the finish line, [he] terminated his membership. “I did it like this to keep my reindeer in the tournament organized by SVL competitions”.

However,

Although [he] was a member of SHL for only half an hour, the rules were clear: He had been member of two associations in one season and been awarded by the SHL. Thus, he could not be awarded in the SVL tournament. (*Altaposten*,² 24 March 2013)

As events unfolded, this conflict seemed to be the initiating spark for the Norwegian Sámi parliament to initiate a reorganization of Sámi sport. A Norwegian Sámi parliament politician states:

It was mainly due to conflicts within the reindeer racing milieu. It was very unfortunate, that within a small milieu there was much quarreling about event schedules and participation and all that stuff, and for one reason or another the Sámi parliament had messed up (itself into it) by being main financier for both competitive organizations (politician, Sámi parliament-N). In 2015, the Norwegian Sámi parliament council (i.e. government) delivered a report on Sámi sport (Sámi parliament-N, 2015). It emphasized the importance of sport for Sámi and for Sápmi and justified its own involvement by pointing to the importance of providing arenas for nurturing Sámi belonging through everyday settings in which Sámi culture and language are employed. According to the Sámi parliament in Norway, sport is conceived as crucial because it facilitates development and maintenance of Sámi community and Sámi identity especially for youth. However, regarding organization:

The Sámi parliament is concerned with the challenges visible within the organization of the reindeer racing sport. Reindeer racing is an activity that according to the council is important to develop. The *reindeer milieu* is small, and it is today organized in *two associations*. According to the council’s opinion, this is not beneficial, and the council observes that this organization has not been the best for the development of reindeer racing as a sport. (Sámi parliament-N, 2015, p. 5; emphasis added)

The report comprised concrete recommendations as the Sami parliament seemed convinced that a reorganization will ‘strengthen the organization of Sámi sport’ and that it will ‘mimic the Norwegian sports model where the ministry allocates money to the Norwegian Sports Confederation which in turn conducts the further distribution’ (Sámi parliament-N, 2015, p. 6).

This is a very active proposal by a public organization for a voluntary organization. The proposal is intentionally mimicking the Norwegian system, which is paradoxical when the main argument for the Sámi sport organization for receiving independent funding is based on Sámi sport’s uniqueness (Skille, 2012). Another striking feature of the report is the blatant absence of any recognition that Sápmi is larger than Norway, even though it includes formulations related to the participation in the AWG (an international sports event for circumpolar indigenous peoples) which is clearly not an isolated

Norwegian issue. Sápmi sends one delegation to the AWG, together with delegates from Finland, Sweden and Norway. However,

It has proven difficult for participants from Swedish and Finnish parts of Sápmi to obtain finance for AWG participation. In effect, this means that it is the Norwegian Sámi parliament's contribution to SVL-N which to a large extent supports participation in AWG. (Sámi parliament-N, 2015, p. 7)

Although 'the Sámi parliament council will discuss this in SPR' (the Sámi parliamentary council, a cooperative organ constituted by the three Sámi parliaments in Finland, Sweden, Norway), there has not been any cross-border cooperation in this matter so far.

As alluded to previously in this paper, the Norwegian Sámi parliament commissioned a consultancy company to undertake the reorganization process. The company formulated a draft agreement for 'The establishment of a new organization of Sámi sport' (consultancy report), suggesting an organization model consisting of an 'all Sámi' (across Sápmi/the Nordic countries) umbrella organization with three federations: reindeer racing, football, and one covering skiing, running and lassoing. Regarding one of the key cross-border issues, a report (from a meeting between SVL-N, FA Sápmi, SHL and the consultancy firm) adds:

SVL is organized under each country: Norway, Finland and Sweden. SHL and FA Sápmi have separate organizations which cover all of Sápmi. After a potential merger, the Sámi parliament [N] has signalled that they are prepared to finance athletes who today are affiliated with SVL-Finland and SVL-Sweden (consultancy report).

Thus, it appears to be easier for the Norwegian Sámi parliament to finance all instead of involving the Finnish and Swedish organizations. Later in the meeting report, it is stated:

SVL-N has submitted a proposal in which SVL-N would take on the role of being the umbrella organization ... SVL-N is suggested to function as the umbrella organization instead of SVL, because it is easier to make changes in SVL-N. More substantial changes demand formal negotiations with the general assemblies in both organizations, but in practical terms it is easier to make the needed adjustments in SVL-N which has only board members from Norway, in contrast to SVL where both Sweden and Finland are represented (consultant report).

These are the rather descriptive outlines of the process. In the following we turn to the opinions of the various key stakeholders in the Norwegian and the Finnish parts of Sápmi.

Opinions and tensions

As per [Figure 1](#), there are many organizations involved in Sámi sport. Moreover, as interviews will show, the relationships and interdependencies between the public and voluntary organizations in the Finland and Norway are complex. The relationship between the organizations in Norway where the reorganization was initiated, is illustrative in this regard. From the vantage point of the Sámi parliament, the Sámi sport organization does not deliver proportionally to the support it receives. One politician holds a rather moderate view: 'SVL-N have made it relatively well. They receive a good amount of support from the Sámi parliament compared to the tasks they undertake. They get a lot out of the money to put it that way' (politician, Sámi parliament-N), while the

bureaucrat employee – especially regarding the two reindeer racing communities – is somewhat more forthright: ‘The use of resources was not in proportion to the results’ (bureaucrat, Sámi parliament-N). The SVL-N representative on the other hand, felt little understanding from the Sámi parliament:

Now the organization has expanded because we have football and reindeer racing under us. But we have only one employee who is supposed to organize everything, which is not sustainable. We cannot continue with only one employee, and the Sámi parliament does not understand that (administrator, SVL-N).

The SVL-N representative refers to the fact that SVL-N has been charged with the responsibility to govern all Sámi sport during the reorganization process. Consequently, representatives of SVL-N experience increased workload. They also experience a lack of anchoring of their own role in the other Sámi sport organizations. The Minutes from the SVL-N general assembly, 2018, stated that ‘SVL-N’s general assembly has decided to postpone this case, to make it possible for member clubs to participate in the next consultation process’ (SVL-N, Minutes from meeting). It continues:

The majority of the general assembly is of the opinion that the case ... is in conflict with the SVL-N’s constitution. ... This is because [the reorganization] is also a Nordic cooperation, and then SVL is the proper organization to handle this. (SVL-N, Minutes from meeting)

An SVL administrator explains that ‘SVL Sweden does not want to take part in the reorganization. ... The Swedish Sámi parliament did not know about this reorganization; it was not informed about it; it was never handled in the SPR (Sámi Parliament Council)’ (administrator, SVL-N).

The lack of information and coordination across borders, is confirmed by representatives of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the Finnish Sámi parliament and SVL Finland. A representative of the Sport Unit in the Ministry of Education and Culture states: ‘When it comes to the reorganization, we have not heard anything’. The representative sees it as an issue for the voluntary sport system to handle since matters regarding organization should emanate from the grass roots and from the independent municipalities as local actors:

The organization of Sámi sport has [always] been local and the starting point has [always] been the Sámi parliament’s will and the municipalities in the Sámi homeland. They have not contacted us here in Sport Unit, and we have not been the “main” contributor of Sámi sport either. (bureaucrat, Ministry of Education and Culture)

On an overarching level, a cross-border Sámi sport organization is considered important. The bureaucrat explicates:

There must be some organization for Sámi people and Sámi sport between Finland, Sweden and Norway, even if it is dominated by Norwegian representation. I think we should use time to put Sámi sport on the policy agenda and discuss it here in Finland too. We could organize something between Barents, regional state agencies and the Lapland Sport Federation [independent regional third sector sport organization], which are the conventional public and third sector organizations. (bureaucrat, Ministry of Education and Culture).

Unknowingly, the Finnish state’s bureaucrat illustrates a position which is well known from the literature relating to the Swedish and Norwegian governments’ positions on

Sámi sport, a position of general lack of both competence and interest in the issue (Fahlén & Skille, 2016, 2017).

The Finnish Sámi parliament, on the other hand, appears more familiar with and reveals more clear-cut opinions on the cross-border nature of Sámi sport organization. The representative states ‘we ought to have more Nordic cooperation between Finland, Sweden and Norway and speak more generally about Nordic activities, not just association by association ... reorganizing Sámi sport could help my work in the Finnish Sámi parliament’ (bureaucrat, Sámi parliament-F). Simultaneously, the representative also points out some challenges, here illustrated by a rather gloomy outlook on the neighbors.

The Sámi in Norway are not the easiest ones; their mentality is that ‘money talks’ ... there are huge cultural differences regarding procedures. ... But you must understand the history of Norway. Things are easier for them because of the money (bureaucrat, Sámi parliament-F).

However, when it comes to the reorganizing process specifically, the representative of the Finnish Sámi parliament holds:

I think it was 2017 when there was a lot of discussion about reorganizing the overall structure of the regional associations, but I think the people [advocating for it] were changed. Now I do not know what the situation is.

The representative’s opinion is clear though: ‘I fully support one organization in Sámi sport. It gives power and creates more actors. But it ought to include representatives from Norway, Sweden and Finland. For me, there is no choice when speaking about the administration’ of Sámi sport (bureaucrat, Sámi parliament-F). The cultural differences, or a difficult collaboration atmosphere, are also distinguishable when looking at these aspects from the viewpoint of the SVL-F’s representative. In the following quote it is evident though that the issue contains more than just different opinions on how to cooperate. It appears to be also a question about different viewpoints and opinions on what sport is and should be.

The most troublesome people are ‘*so-called Sámi people*’ [without official Sámi status]. They want to maximize sport performance. They forget community, networks, and cultural aspects. Geographical aspects are missing as well as the Sámi Homeland. Everybody is speaking Norwegian; we do not hear Sámi anymore. This is one thing. They want only success, even when we are talking about young people (representative, SVL-F).

For the Finnish SVL representative, the starting point of the reorganization process is still unknown. He connects the reorganization process to money by saying ‘For some reason ... they [the Norwegians] started to argue about money. Then this reorganizing process started’. Moreover, the interviewees showed an ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the reorganizing process:

If the plans are effectuated and end up with a new organization, I don’t mind. So far, there has been SVL-N and funding has come from Norway to Norwegian Sámi people. And now, if they are changing the structures, they can support financially all – no matter what the association is and from which country. Last autumn (2019) there wasn’t any funding and none to apply for. So, I don’t know what the situation for this new organization is (representative, SVL-F).

Despite all good intentions, the initiative to reorganize Sámi sport has challenged existing institutions. In the next section, we apply the theoretical toolbox presented above.

Discussion

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on the complexity surrounding the organization of sport in nations without nation-state status, and more specifically on sport politics across countries and across sectors. To do so, we used a recent initiative launched by the Sámi parliament in Norway to restructure the organization of Sámi sport. The results show how such an initiative by a public/semi-public sector organization subordinate to one specific nation-state has implications for public/semi-public sector organizations and voluntary organizations in other countries, contributing in turn to the complexity surrounding the organization of sport in nations without nation-state status. The way the reorganization was perceived and acted upon by representatives of the organizations affected, show how organizational and individual actors perform institutional work that both rationalize structures and offer resistance to institutional demands (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Following Meyer and Rowan (1977), we explicate these dynamics with the ambition to further the understanding of how post-colonial structures still define daily life for indigenous groups struggling to perform cultural activities rooted in the pre-nation-state era, because the society is structured by institutions bound to particular organizations.

Taking a chronological point of departure, the first observation pertains to the establishment of the separate reindeer racing organization that in turn is seen as initiating the reorganization initiative. By making use of the sense-making concept (Everitt & Levinson, 2016) and the interactionist proposition (Hallett, 2010) arguing that processes of recoupling occur when individuals question the legitimacy of existing rationalized structures, it becomes visible how the establishment of a new organization was about challenging nation-state structures and reclaiming pre-nation-state borders. Even though the establishment was resisted for both very practical reasons (e.g. participants having to be member of two associations), and institutional reasons (e.g. competition over mandate to award champions), data also indicate that actors perceived of it as positive. The upside was the opportunity to crown a Sámi champion (i.e. the champion of Sápmi and *not* Norwegian Sápmi in this case); that made more sense to the individuals and organizations active in the reindeer racing milieu than crowning a champion of a specific geographical part of Sápmi (the Norwegian) created by the nation-state historically opposing to the idea of a joint geographical Sápmi, governed by the Sámi. In turn, this shows how institutionalized structures can be challenged and redefined (Hallett, 2010). Simultaneously, it also shows how deeply ingrained the institutionalized logic of sport performance is (Stenling & Fahlén, 2009), since crowning a Sámi champion in a competition arranged by a Norwegian organization is seen as illegitimate. In sum, legitimacy is pursued both by adhering to one rationalized myth (Everitt & Levinson, 2016) – that of sport performance, and by revising another (Hallett, 2010) – that of the understanding of a united Indigenous nation.

Continuing chronologically, the second observation relates to the initiative taken to reorganize. Paradoxically enough, it appears as if one of the main arguments to reorganize in a new organization headed by one of the parties is to establish unity and concert in

the joint Sámi movement. Again, albeit in another way, sense is made by disrupting one institutionalized structure (one joint organization with representatives from three nation-states), while simultaneously drawing on another ('the best for the development of reindeer racing as a sport', (Sámi parliament-N, 2015, p. 5)). Evidently it is held important to provide arenas for nurturing Sámi belonging through everyday settings in which Sámi culture and language are employed. But it is equally important, to do so in *one* nation-state setting. Since it was the Norwegian Sámi parliament which initiated the reorganization, it is difficult to avoid regarding also the Norwegian Sámi parliament as a rationalized structure which is 'deeply ingrained in, and reflects, widespread understandings of social reality' (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 343).

By merely creating a *Norwegian* Sámi parliament, the rationalized structure of the Norwegian nation-state, as the stronger part, has a prerogative in defining (or at least seriously affecting) the understanding of social reality as a Norwegian reality. In so doing, it achieves two things. First, it places the nation-state as superior to the indigenous homeland of Sápmi, and by that affirms existing (and favorable) power relations that are important in maintaining the legitimacy of a *Norwegian* Sámi parliament (and a Finnish and a Swedish too for that matter), instead of a joint Sámi parliament not bound by nation-state borders. Second, it nurtures the old colonialist aspirations of being the one legitimate (or at least the strongest) governor of Sápmi. In such an interpretation, it is not that surprising that the strongest (in numbers and apparently in resources) nation-state takes a chance to reaffirm the legitimacy of the rationalized structure it constitutes.

Concluding the chronology of the reorganization of Sámi sport, the third and final observation is related to how the remaining actors perceive the attempts made by the strongest actor to equate Sámi sport with Norwegian Sámi sport. In this regard it is first of all apparent that the battle lines are not drawn so much between individual nation-states, but instead between the nation-states collectively (or via their Sámi parliament proxies respectively) on the one hand and the Sámi community on the other. This is evident through the SVL-N representatives' experiences of lacking a mandate from the other Sámi organizations, but also in writing when the SVL-N general assembly decided to postpone the case to make it possible for member clubs to take part in the consultation process. The SVL-N general assembly even went to the lengths of explicating that any potential reorganization should be a Nordic cooperation and that SVL would be the legitimate actor handling it (SVL-N, 2018). The Finnish voices in the data affirm this stance, albeit in other words by emphasizing that any decisions in the matter should emanate from the grass roots and from the municipalities in the Sámi homeland. In other words, the institutionalization of Sámi sport depends on individual actions (Blumer, 1969; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006).

In any case, data from the Finnish representatives indicate that a Sámi sport organization should include representatives from Norway, Sweden and Finland. From the interviews with all these representatives it is evident that much of the legitimacy of Sámi sport, and in extension of Sámi sport organization rests on respecting and calling on the pre-nation-state borders – a joint Sápmi. From the perspective of these respondents, the dividing lines are instead drawn between different views on the *raison d'être* of Sámi sport, or on what legitimacy bases Sámi sport should be built (cf. Strittmatter et al., 2018): Sámi sport for cultural belonging or Sámi sport for maximizing sport

performance. It is apparent in this respect that the various respondents rationalize sport differently and represent different understandings of social reality (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Somewhat at odds with key tenets of institutional thinking, that organizations in any given field would conform to each other's form and practice (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), the organizations in this particular field have yet to become guided by the same rationalized myths; what sport is versus what Sápmi is, and thus what Sámi sport is. Or perhaps they do not belong to the same field? An equally plausible interpretation could be that Finnish organizations belong to a Finnish field in which sport is legitimized by cultural connotations while the Norwegian organizations belong to a Norwegian field in which sport is legitimized as performance optimization.

Concluding remarks

In order for such questions to be answered, future research on indigenous sport must address some of the limitations of this study. One such, connected to the question of defining institutional fields in order to understand different organizational behavior in more detail, is the limited number of views given voice in this study. The limitation concerns both the actual number of individuals interviewed, but more importantly the variation between them. Most tellingly, future studies must include representatives of all parts of Sápmi. Reiterating the limitations of Skille and Fahlén's study from 2020 pointed out in the introduction to this paper, further and stronger efforts must be made to obtain access to Russian and Swedish representatives in addition. Until then, it is hazardous to provide any reliable implications for practice, since the practice in question can, and most probably will, vary. The point is that Sámi sport might not comprise one organizational field, but four fields (constituted along the nation-state borders). However, a few tentative implications can still be suggested. The first is directed to decision-makers in government agencies responsible for and/or involved in cross-border and cross-sectoral issues and might come across as a trite insight: if any substantial cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation is to be expected, it is imperative to take into account the opinions of all parties involved. Although data in this study shows how a superior standing, based on numbers or resources – or both – can enforce change, reform inter-organizational relationship, and restructure the distribution of power, previous studies have shown that the long-term viability of any organizational change is dependent on the legitimacy of the initiator, the form and content of the reform (e.g. Fahlén et al., 2014). A second is directed at indigenous groups striving for self-determination in post-colonial contexts. Even though Author (Skille and Fahlen, 2020) shows that also indigenous groups are fractioned, the findings in this study point to the importance of maintaining a unified voice in matters important to the group as a collective.

Notes

1. The Swedish and Norwegian authors do not understand Finnish (Finnish belongs to the Finno-Ugric language family; Swedish and Norwegian belong to the Nordic-Germanic language family). The Finnish author understands Norwegian and Swedish. All authors read, speak and write English.
2. Local newspaper in the largest town in Finnmark, the northernmost county of Norway.

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