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# Political leaders as agents in regional development

Giuseppe Calignano<sup>1</sup> and Trond Nilsen<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

The study of agency has received increasing attention in recent years. The focus on change processes at the micro-level has brought new insights into the field of regional development. However, in debates about change and regional development, agents and leaders themselves have received far less attention than agency as a process. We provide an analytical model to show how political leaders and their leadership act as drivers of change through what we call *actor properties* (i.e., knowledge, networks and resources). We discuss how *actor properties* interact with the institutional context in which leaders operate and the various transitions from a political leader's legitimacy to the legacy of their political action. Empirical investigations of two peripheral regions in Italy and Norway illustrate how political leaders act as agents of change in geographical areas characterized by different socioeconomic and institutional contexts.

**JEL Codes:** R00, R10, R50

## Keywords

Human agency, political leaders, place-based leadership, regional development, development paths, analytical framework

## 1. Introduction

The topic of agency addresses how actors interact with and can compensate for regional structures that drive change in historically developed economic, social and institutional architectures (Nilsen et al., 2022; Steen, 2016). Several types of agents can help shape regional development paths, despite unfavourable conditions. Such agents have primarily been identified in innovative firms (Isaksen et al., 2019), local entrepreneurs (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020), policymakers (Dawley, 2014) and even fringe actors (Jolly et al., 2020). Many studies have tackled the topic of politics in regional development (Chlebna and Simmie, 2018; Dawley et al., 2015; MacKinnon et al., 2022) and how power influences place-based leadership and innovative

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entrepreneurship (Nilsen et al., 2022; Sotarauta, 2012). However, only a few studies have examined political leaders, their type of leadership, and their role in regional development.

Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) focus on agency as a process and examine its consequences. We aim to contribute to this debate by highlighting the *actor properties* that make a difference in driving regional change. We focus on political leaders and argue that it is the combination of their *actor properties* that makes change possible. *Actor properties* consist of knowledge, networks and resources. *Knowledge* refers to the capacity to combine three processes (know-how, know-why and know-what). Know-how corresponds to the process of learning-by-doing (Arrow, 1962), whereby knowledge about how to perform a task accumulates with experience over time (Garud, 1997). Know-why refers to learning-by-studying, involving the ability to understand principles and theories underlying the functioning of a specific system (e.g., decision-making processes). Know-what refers to learning-by-using where knowledge is created and situated at the nexus of the relationship between actors. In this respect, *networks* refer to the social, political, or economic ties involving decision-makers and relations with other influent actors. Finally, *resources* refer to the combination of the previous two processes, drawing on a stock of materials, capital, staff, and other elements to influence a specific decision. *Actor properties* may range from political talent to extensive webs of relations, involving a strong reputation, superior competencies, rhetorical skills, and charisma.

Compared with local entrepreneurs and policymakers (Dawley, 2014; Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020; Isaksen et al., 2019) political leaders at the meso-level typically have a broader scope and more extensive impact, as they give expression to regional values, reinforce symbolic elements, and even defend specific interests or advocate regional needs on the national political scene (Wanna, 2014). Skilled political leaders can leverage aspirations, motivations, and visions of the future to achieve regional change. This change can be broader than narrower outcomes in industries, spheres, and types of workers, as in the case of, for example, a local university rector or an influential unionist. Political leaders do not operate in isolation and can choose between a variety of policy options and implement combined policy actions that lead to durable effects at the regional level. Our focus is on how politicians, embedded in multi-governance networks (Morgan, 2014), assisted by their collaborators, and legitimised by their *followers*, can trigger a process of change and lead to what we call *legacy*, i.e., what tangibly and intangibly remains at the end of a leader's political experience. This creates the background for the following research question: *How can political leaders act as drivers of change in regional development?*

While place-based leadership refers to orchestrating efforts across actor groups, negotiating efforts between dominant and niche actors, our main contribution adds to the 'trinity of change agency' (TCA) and place-based leadership approach by bringing the agent and their *properties* to the centre of the analysis. We argue that place-based leadership processes can be spearheaded by talented, skilled, and powerful political leaders. We illustrate our theoretical argument by highlighting two comparative cases. First, we discuss the

figure of Nichi Vendola, a southern Italian politician who is associated with the political movement called 'Primavera Pugliese' (Apulian Spring). Second, we concentrate on Alf E. Jakobsen, a political leader from Finnmark (northern Norway). Jakobsen coordinated collaborations to attract multinational corporations (MNCs) to the Arctic peripheral coastal region.

## **2. Human agency, agents and regional development: The role of politics**

Until recently, the economic geography literature has mainly focused on structural approaches at the expense of human agency. A discussion on human agency and agents seems to be largely lacking in this literature (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). Although the role of agency may lead to new development paths in all the possible types of regional innovation systems (RISs) (see Isaksen and Trippl, 2016), agents are particularly relevant in 'thinner' RISs because they may represent a key resource to the lock-in situation.

### *2.1. Human agency and agents in regional development*

Human agency is not a new topic in economic geography (e.g. Dawley, 2014; Simmie, 2012), but it has recently attracted interest in different contexts. According to Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020: 707), '[h]uman agency refers to intentional, purposive and meaningful actions, and the intended and unintended consequences of such actions'. This extends the literature on regional economic change by elucidating how and to what extent local actors participate in the shaping of new regional development paths, and by acknowledging the potential of human agency as a key mechanism for structural change (e.g. Njøs et al., 2017).

Much of the research in regional development has been directed towards agency as a process and captures the actors' actions and their consequences, whereas agents refer to 'who' performs these actions, drawing attention to the actor themselves (Jolly et al., 2020). Less attention has been paid to the latter aspect. Scholars have primarily focused on change processes (e.g., Bækkelund, 2021; Grillitsch et al., 2022), how changes occur and the consequences of certain actions, without exploring the types of *actor properties* (i.e., knowledge, networks and resources) that they can use. We focus on a specific agent of change (i.e., political leaders and the actions carried out through their leadership) but embedded in the context of human agency in regional development. We argue that political leaders possess a variety of *actor properties* (e.g., political talent, competences, networking, rhetorical skills, charisma) that can contribute to regional change, thereby leading to a certain *legacy* (i.e., the tangible and intangible durable results of political actions).

However, human agency does not emerge in isolation. Nilsen et al. (2022) discuss the conditions relevant to its emergence, namely *actor composition* and *power* relations. A low degree of differentiation between actors creates vulnerable regions because the number of possible change agents is limited, whereas a higher level of diversity among regional actors creates more robust differentiation in actor composition. We support

the idea that skilled political leaders may successfully drive change even in peripheral or less advanced regional settings by effectively mobilising the knowledge and resources they possess and benefitting from a third type of *property*, such as networking with key national politicians or bottom-up political approaches to enhance local consensus.

Nilsen et al. (2022) argue that the role of power relations is important in terms of the ability to create agency and related change. Sotarauta (2009: 898) defines power as ‘a potential to influence’, and ‘makes other actors see things, people, functions, etc., differently from before and as a result do something that they would not otherwise do’. Actors exercise power indirectly through their networks, their capacity to convince others and their ability to introduce new ideas. However, power is unequally distributed among actors, and depends on the characteristics of where it is exercised (Grillitsch, 2016). Some political leaders have more *authority* and *power* than others. Such skewness may also entail a positive dimension and lead to beneficial regional change if the power is used appropriately.

In the TCA model proposed by Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020), the emergence of new regional paths is understood when three theoretically distinct types of transformative agency are combined: innovative entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship, and place-based leadership. Innovative entrepreneurship drives path-breaking innovation and transforms places by triggering changes in industrial specialisations. It refers to actions of novel combinations of knowledge and resources that facilitate change. Innovative entrepreneurs do not act in a social vacuum. Institutional entrepreneurship demands that new development paths require institutional change. Risk-taking and opportunity-oriented institutional entrepreneurship are essential as the second transformative agency. Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020: 708) argue that ‘place-based leadership is important to orchestrate actions and to pool competencies, powers and resources to benefit both the actors’ individual objectives and a region more broadly’. Depending on the regional context, different combinations of change agency patterns may emerge (MacKinnon et al., 2019).

Informing our approach towards political leaders and anchored in our understanding of the relationship between agency and agents, we draw inspiration from the literature on place-based leadership. We argue that the broader co-ordinating and facilitating role in change processes postulated by the place-based leadership perspective is relevant as it highlights the orchestration efforts among different actor groups and the services provided to the inhabitants of a specific place (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2000). Sotarauta and Beer (2017: 212) state that place-based leaders ‘tend to possess a greater range and depth of assets – including commitment to advancing the region – than other actors’. In our understanding, this is what skilled and inspirational political leaders do. However, work on place-based leadership has tended to adopt a process perspective and describe the actions taken to facilitate change, while the agents of change are not theorized.

Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) argue that place-based leadership ought to be capable of looking beyond the narrow interests of individual actors and thus reach beyond short-termism. We argue that political leaders are not exclusively narrow or short-term-oriented agents, but concerned about the broader development of places, which may include overall well-being, quality of life, and a sense of belonging. Regional political leaders and the combination of *properties* they possess represent a relevant addition to the TCA and place-based leadership perspectives. Sundqvist states that ‘little attention has been paid to investigating the conditions for regional political leadership, and the relationship between the regional councils’ institutional capacity and politicians’ perceived influence on regional development is somewhat unexplored’ (Sundqvist, 2021: 59). This calls for a broader discussion and in-depth consideration of how regional political leaders, their *actor properties*, and their leadership style drive change in terms of possible development paths.

## 2.2. Political leaders, their leadership and human agency

Successful political leaders are individuals who can establish their *authority*, persuade *followers* and voters, achieve *legitimacy*, and act as agents of regional change through their political actions. Despite the interest political leaders and their biographies arouse among the public, the academic literature on political leadership is far from comprehensive (Laing, 2020). Limited space is devoted to political leadership in political science and sociology textbooks and compendia, while Foley (2013) noted how the terms ‘leaders’ and ‘leadership’ are not indexed in the 1,312 pages that make up the authoritative volume of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Science*.

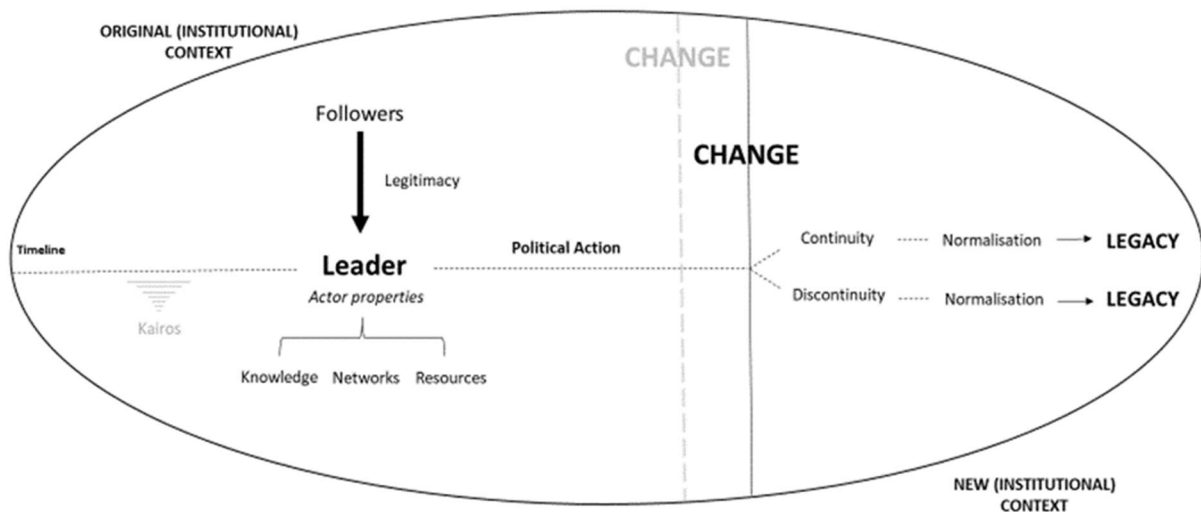
Why such a limited theoretical corpus on political leadership? Politicians are individuals, and political leaders remain actors with specific combinations of behaviours and traits that make them hard to classify. Political leadership is dynamic, and the same leader may adopt different leadership styles throughout the various phases of their political career. Being simultaneously leader of a party and prime minister or governor makes it difficult to delineate a stable profile for targeted politicians. The rise of a leader and the development of their leadership in a place are episodic, which makes it problematic to identify patterns and regularities (see Foley, 2013; Laing, 2020). The very peculiarities of leaders and the specificity of their leadership support our approach to studying particularly talented politicians as human agents.

We recognize that system-level agency and socioeconomic institutional contexts play a key role in regional development dynamics and consider them explicitly in our analytical model. Given these assumptions, we believe that leading political figures who possess ideas, skills, abilities, network breadth and charisma (i.e., what we call *actor properties*) can inspire and receive legitimacy from their followers and implement successful policy actions, thereby triggering a process of change. In other words, political leaders are critical agents and should not be overlooked.

### 3. The analytical framework: Political leadership and the dynamics of change

Our model in Figure 1 highlights how political leaders emerge in existing regional socio-economic, political and institutional contexts. An institutional context refers to ‘patterns of interactions based on legitimate normative expectations’ (Glückler, 2020: 237) and entails a complex of laws and rules (formal institutions), habits, routines, cultural norms and ways of doing things (Edquist and Johnson, 1997). Institutions represent a force for stability and continuity and are primarily characterised by a certain inertia. They change slowly, and agents may accelerate the transition to a mutated institutional context (Harris, 2012).

**Figure 1.** Political leaders as agents in regional development: an analytical framework.



We approach leadership as ‘a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal’ (Laing, 2020: 21). Three main elements enable political leaders to exert such influence: *power*, *authority* and *followers* (Figure 1). Political leaders use *social power* to drive change. This is defined as the ability to incentivise others to think and act in ways that they would not otherwise do, to achieve a given outcome (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). Skilled political leaders inspire change and mobilise others towards a particular end, while contributing to regional change in liberal democracies using different *properties*. Qualities and abilities such as inspirational values, extensive networking, competence and charisma can be possessed by political leaders, and these characteristics can also coincide in particularly talented individuals (Laing, 2020). How these *properties* are embodied and combined in political leaders can determine the effectiveness of their political action, and their ability to implement policy measures (in Figure 1, see the vertical solid and dashed line corresponding to the term ‘change’). In this regard, *time* and the

identification of key events ('critical junctures') are critical factors. Approaches such as 'temporality' (Archer, 1995) and 'path tracing' (Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2023) provide a relevant background for integrating *time* into our analytical model (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Leadership style refers to how politicians interact with followers, communicate with the public, make decisions, and negotiate with and respond to their opponents (Laing, 2020). The literature traditionally differentiates between *transformational* leaders, who show a broad vision and an inspirational style, and *transactional* leaders, who are characterised by a narrower vision and managerial style (Burns, 1978). *Transformational* leadership is associated with major changes in the extant regional settings. However, the differences between *transformational* and *transactional* leadership are less sharp than one might expect. There are examples of political leaders having an extensive influence on their society through small-scale and incremental experimentations, even in subnational contexts (Laing, 2020).

One of the *actor properties* is the ability to persuade, which is related to Aristotle's modes of rhetoric. It is determined by logical argument (*logos*), emotional language (*pathos*), and the credibility of the speaker (*ethos*). Moreover, *kairos* (i.e., 'the right moment') is a critical element in the action of political leaders. In addition to choosing the right words to obtain maximum impact at a given critical moment (Sipiora and Baumlin, 2012), political leaders must interpret the desire for change manifested by society and understand when it is the appropriate time to act. This has similarities to 'opportunity space' theorized by Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020), according to which regional preconditions, timing and circumstances are crucial. Through *actor properties*, political leaders persuade followers, who legitimise their social power and political action through their democratic election.

Distinct policies may contribute to a de-institutionalisation of the existing setting and the creation of new development paths. When a radically or incrementally new context is in place, the political scenario can be characterised by political *continuity* (re-election of the same leader), *discontinuity* (replacement by another similarly powerful politician representing divergent ideals and interests, or aspiring to different or even conflicting objectives) or normalisation (decreasing effectiveness in the political action of the targeted leader or election of another politician who does not show the same personal authority). Given the few exceptionally talented political leaders who occasionally emerge, the mutated regional context tends to lead to stability and *normalisation*.

*Normalisation* is the stage where legacy is observed, that is, 'what remains' in the region after the political action and the policy measures implemented by the leader. *Legacy* can be in the institutional, socioeconomic, and industrial spheres, and can be observed, for example, in new infrastructures (industrial plants and clusters), more and better jobs, safer workplaces, greater attention to environmental issues, improved services, etc. The *legacy* of political action is the result of radical or incremental changes and can give rise to a new development path that is initiated and needs to be strengthened or revamped by the action



of knowledgeable political leaders and other intertwined human and system-level agencies (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020; Grillitsch et al., 2022).

#### **4. Methodology**

We used in-depth interviews, document analysis and observations in the empirical analyses in northern Norway and southern Italy. In the Norwegian case, we interviewed two decision-makers in the national parliament, one representative from the Ministry of Petroleum and Energy, four local firms (suppliers to existing MNCs), one representative from the regional county administration and two local journalists. We interviewed Alf E. Jakobsen on two different occasions. In total, 10 interviews were conducted between 2002 and 2006. Several policy documents and statements from the municipality have been used to highlight the multiple channels through which Jakobsen and his key collaborators sought to influence the decisions that led to the emergence of the oil and gas industry in the region. This was complemented by a recent book edited by Jørstad (2022) on Jakobsen's personality and political actions. We have observed for several years how the political leader manoeuvred within national decision-making bodies, and how he lubricated network relationships.

We relied on four informants in Italy: the co-ordinator of Nichi Vendola's electoral campaign in 2010, the communication consultant and two advisers for Vendola's policy design (i.e., tourism and technology districts). The informants were interviewed in 2010 and 2022. The empirical analysis related to the case of Apulia made use of official documents and statistics, academic works, national and international press.

In both cases, the time span from the interviews to the analysis was between 10 and 15 years. We believe this is an advantage in analytical terms, given our aim of capturing the *legacy* within the region as regional development paths develop slowly. These two case studies are not intended to be exhaustive and are primarily used to provide evidence and examples of how the analytical model presented works in applied situations.

#### **5. Political leadership in practice: Southern Italy and Northern Norway**

We now present the case studies of Apulia in southern Italy (Section 5.1) and Finnmark in northern Norway (Section 5.2). Our findings are presented as a comparison of the two regions and leaders to demonstrate how skilled politicians possessing different combinations of *actor properties* can act as agents of change in peripheral regional areas characterised by similar preconditions, but different socio-economic and institutional contexts. In addition, the importance of 'time' and the identification of critical events (Archer,

1995; Sotara and Grillitsch, 2023) leading from *kairos* to *normalisation* and *legacy* are illustrated (Section 5.3).

### 5.1. Vendola and the Apulian Spring

In 2005, Nicola ‘Nichi’ Vendola (born 1958) surprisingly won the primary election for the presidency of Apulia (southern Italy) against favourite Francesco Boccia, who represented the mainstream national parties. Subsequently, Vendola won the election for presidency of the region against incumbent Raffaele Fitto, who was considered Silvio Berlusconi’s heir within Forza Italia (Giaffreda, 2006). In the mid-2000s, Vendola was considered an innovative, progressive, and disruptive political leader. He helped found the Communist Refoundation Party, was an environmentalist, a strong opponent of organised crime and a former anti-Mafia activist. He was a catholic and homosexual in a traditionally conservative region.

Vendola demonstrated vision, charisma and rhetorical skills and was described as the ‘Italian Obama’ by international press (Goldsmith, 2010). His successful political campaign was managed by a group of young professionals who adopted an original communication style and benefitted from the innovative use of the Internet in the pre-social media era, enabling him to attract the attention of the national and international press, as well as the majority of voters (especially the younger generations). Vendola’s political action led to the so-called ‘Apulian Spring’, which was a political-cultural movement largely inspired by the so-called ‘Southern thought’ developed by sociologist Franco Cassano (Cassano, 2005). One of our interviewees argued that Vendola represented ‘both the initiator and the product’ of the Apulian Spring, thus emphasizing the role played by the existing receptive context—what Grillitsch and Sotara (2020) call ‘preconditions’ or *kairos*— in determining the success of Vendola. Although a grassroots mobilisation and young voters contributed to its unexpected result (Calignano, 2010), the Apulian Spring has roots dating back to the 1990s or even the 1980s, coinciding with the positive experiences of associationism, industrial renewal and endogenous development experienced by the region (Leogrande, 2018).

As reported by one of our informants, during his first mandate (2005–2010), Vendola’s collaborators were chosen mainly from academics, intellectuals, and civil society. Vendola focused on three axes: social and technological innovation, tourism and culture, and the environment. He was considered the most respected leftist leader in Italy (Randall, 2011). Among others, a liberal like Bill Emmott (former editor of *The Economist*) and Emma Marcegaglia (head of Italy’s main employers’ association) expressed their admiration for Vendola, with the latter publicly stating that he was ‘the best governor in Italy’s south’ (Stern, 2011).

Vendola implemented important policy actions during his first five-year term. He launched two successful programmes to promote human capital and youth entrepreneurship (Consolini, 2012) and strengthened technology districts by fostering a thriving industrial atmosphere (Calignano and Fitjar, 2017; Calignano et

al., 2018). His effective tourism policies made Apulia one of the 'fastest growing tourism destinations in Europe over the past ten years' (Mediterranean Sea Basin Programme, 2021). In addition, Vendola launched a project to promote the regional music industry, as well as a Film Commission to develop filmmaking competencies and expertise (Apulia Film Commission, 2022). He attracted investors' attention by linking the 'green economy with knowledge and creativity' (Wells, 2010). The environmental policy implemented by Vendola has also achieved excellent results (Apulia Region, 2022) and the employment rate in Apulia from 2008-2015 grew above the national average (La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno, 2015).

Vendola was reappointed president of Apulia with an overwhelming majority in both primary and regional elections in 2010. In his second campaign, he benefitted from so-called 'Nichi's Factories', i.e., political workshops where ideas were discussed and exchanged freely and democratically. In 2012, more than 600 'factories' were created spontaneously in Apulia, the rest of Italy and abroad (e.g., London, Madrid, Lisbon and Bangkok) (Vitullo, 2012).

This moment represented the peak of Vendola's popularity and *authority* and was followed by a rapid decline in his political leadership, which corresponded to a process of *normalisation* in the region. Vendola's leadership lost momentum. His political action became less independent and more akin to the traditional logic of power, which tends to be predominant in public administration. According to one of our informants, lobbies returned to dominate regional politics, after being marginalised in the first phase. A *normalisation* of the political environment arose.

Vendola's involvement in judicial matters related to irregularities in the environmental control of the ILVA plant in Taranto (one of the largest iron and steel production sites in Europe) and a negative regional economic trend contributed to making Vendola's political action in the region significantly less effective. Above all, because of Vendola's ambition to become the new leader of the national centre-left front, 'Apulia ceased to be an end and became a means for the national game. This resulted in a weakening of the drive for public policy innovation, and [...] every action was functionally oriented towards national political goals' (Leogrande, 2018).

However, the *legacy* of the Apulian Spring is still evident and can be observed in the way the region is perceived by external actors. Today, Apulia is seen as a possible driving force for the modernisation of the Italian Mezzogiorno, as Roberto Cingolani (former Minister for Ecological Transition) recently pointed out (Italpress, 2021). The *legacy* of the Apulian Spring is thus also found in a renewed pride and sense of belonging among Apulians. One of our interviewees, who worked closely with Vendola on the themes of tourism and culture, stressed how today:

[l]ocal governments, entrepreneurs and firms(...), keep on showing a certain capacity of initiative that has been triggered by the experience of the Apulian Spring. The bottom-up push of that season has not been exhausted yet and it has left on the ground the legacy of a certain capacity of initiative and a business culture that is self-driving (Our informant – Interviews conducted in 2022).

In conclusion, here is how Guglielmo Minervini, one of the main protagonists of the Apulian Spring, answered the question of what remains of the Vendola's experience:

What has happened remains, a changed Apulia remains. [T]his [new and more modern] Apulia exists today, and it is an expression of that change that in the Mezzogiorno must struggle much more than elsewhere to emerge and gain space. [The Apulian people] know that they are walking along an arduous road, that they face resistance and sometimes untold obstacles. But today they are rich in a fundamental awareness: it can be done! And it is legitimate to rest our hopes on the Apulia that does (Leogrande, 2018).

### *5.2 Alf E. Jakobsen: A strong mobiliser of regional industry development in the Arctic periphery*

The political leader Alf E. Jakobsen is a well-known senior Norwegian politician who has his roots in Lenvik (Troms and Finnmark county, northern Norway). His political career began in the 1960s in the Labour Party's youth organisation. In 1992, he was elected as a representative of the national parliament. In 1999, he was appointed mayor of Hammerfest, a position he held for 20 years. He obtained large majorities, and he won his last election in 2015 with 75% of the votes, a result that represents a national record. His political talent and engagement, extensive networking, personal charisma and behaviour made him a very popular political leader in Norway.

Jakobsen operated in a region facing significant social, economic, and infrastructural challenges. The economy of the original settlements in the municipality was traditionally based on whaling and fishing. The industrialisation of fisheries in the late 1960s created the cornerstone fabric, which for some years was an important employer for the municipality (Nilsen, 2002). In the 1970s, more than 1,200 people were employed in the region's fishery industry, in a municipality of 9,000 inhabitants. However, the gradual restructuring of the fishery industry created an exogenous challenge for the municipality, and the need to renew the local industrial structure became essential (Eikeland et al., 2009). Over the decades, Jakobsen played a key role in local, regional and national politics and administrative authorities, serving in various national political and legislative bodies, and as a board member of industry associations and companies. Northern Norway's leading newspaper, *Nordlys* (2019), wrote about Jakobsen:

That's how Jakobsen became Finnmark's 'strongman'. [He] became a strategist and alliance builder, in Oslo he was perceived as a spokesman for northern Norwegian common interests. No one in the Labour Party dared to make important decisions that affected northern Norway without asking Jakobsen for advice.

In 1984, the first gas field was located in the region. There was resistance because of environmental concerns, and the petroleum industry was perceived as a threat to fisheries. Jakobsen and his colleagues highlighted the need for industry expansion in the sector on a local scale and began working through political mobilization and hypothesizing possible collaborations between fishermen and the oil industry based on joint projects. He used his charismatic leadership and personality to highlight narratives about the region's future development paths, organizing public meetings locally, and engaging and activating local and regional media. The message was clear: 'Hammerfest must expand its industry to create jobs for the future workforce' (Øverås, 2009).

The timing of his political leadership was serendipitous because it coincided with the region's experience of a population decline due to the reduced demand for labour in the fisheries. Young people left the region to search for better education and job opportunities and did not return. People became very optimistic about the petroleum industry in terms of jobs, increased income, and diversification. Jakobsen activated his networks within the governmental party (Labour Party) and industry associations, which together facilitated, through the intervention of the Ministry of Finance, a tax cut for investments in the Arctic for the petroleum industry (NRK, 2001). This tax reduction led to the construction of the first gas plant (Snøhvit) in Hammerfest, the total cost of which was 6 billion euros. This created a structural change for the region (Eikeland et al., 2009; Fitjar, 2013). The regional employment in the oil and gas industry increased from 30 employees in 2000 to 1,430 in 2013 (Nilsen and Karlsen, 2016; Nilsen, 2019). The oil and gas industry reversed trends in the local economy with a shift from decline to growth in the number of jobs; young people returned to settle in the region after completing higher education, and the labour market became more diversified. However, few local businesses were actively engaged in the sector. Based on political pressure and mobilisation through public hearings, and informal networking during 2006–2014, the national government launched a 'local content' policy to qualify regional enterprises, create a regional business environment, encourage research and development activities, and locate MNCs' offices in the region. Jakobsen and his colleagues played an important role in this by mobilising for 'local content' policies by encouraging MNCs to participate and engage in projects that would have regional ripple effects and spillovers. In 2014, the second oil and gas plant (the Goliath development) was built, with important onshore service functions, thereby increasing the number of jobs in the municipality.

Jakobsen planned his retirement and announced it publicly in 2018. This occurred in parallel with the *normalisation* in the region. Companies realised that it was very difficult to recruit highly qualified staff for permanent positions in the region and began to facilitate commuting. This led to an increase in the number of regional part-time workers. Of the approximately 1,400 people working in the oil and gas areas in 2020, 40% were commuting from different parts of Norway.

When Jakobsen retired from the public scene, the *legacy* of his political action remained. He had succeeded in mobilising people within the region and decision-makers at the national level, as well as MNCs, to take enormous economic and strategic risks, and to establish two plants in the Arctic periphery.

### *5.3. Systematising our findings: A systematic comparison of the two targeted regions and leaders, and the importance of 'time' in our analytical model*

If we briefly scrutinize the two regions in the period preceding the political actions of Nichi Vendola and Alf E. Jakobsen (Table 1), we observe that Apulia was characterised by a broader economic structure (agribusiness, textiles, footwear, furniture, tourism, a few technology sectors) (Osservatorio Relazioni Territori-Imprese, 2016) than the more specialised region of Finnmark, whose predominant economic activities were fisheries and the public sector (Nilsen, 2017). Apulia had a broader labour market due to its larger population (about 4 million inhabitants vs. 75,000 in Finnmark), a greater variety of industrial sectors, and a young and skilled population (Sistema Puglia, 2007). However, Apulia's economic situation was deteriorating when Vendola appeared. After an expansionary phase in the 1990s, the region experienced a decline that coincided with low economic growth and a rising unemployment rate (Confcommercio, 2009). The situation in Finnmark before Jakobsen's election in 1999 was stable, but equally declining due to emigration and lack of growth in the existing economy. In both regions a certain discontent was spreading among the population, although for different reasons: lack of job opportunities for young and skilled people in Finnmark (Nilsen, 2017) and long-standing socio-economic problems and lack of trust in elected regional governments in Apulia (Giaffreda, 2006). These elements seem to be directly related to other relevant institutional differences that can be observed between Apulia and Finnmark and involve persistent critical factors such as power relations, trust, and regional culture. More specifically, the two regions reflect the characteristics of the respective national or macro-regional contexts: in the late 1990s, Finnmark largely coincided with most other Norwegian and Nordic regions by showing well-balanced power relations, high trust in society and relatively progressive culture (see, e.g., Holmberg and Rothberg, 2020). In contrast, Apulia in the 2000s was not dissimilar to the other lagging Southern Italian regions, which were generally characterised by more unbalanced power relations, comparably lower trust in their respective society, and a conservative culture (see, e.g., Putnam et al., 1993).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Apulia (Southern Italy) and Finnmark (Northern Norway) before the political actions of Nichi Vendola and Alf E. Jakobsen.

	Apulia, Southern Italy	Finnmark, Northern Norway
<b>Industrial structure</b>	Broad	Narrow
<b>Labour market</b>	Broad, but declining	Small and narrow
<b>Economic situation</b>	Expansionary phase followed by weak performance	Stable, declining
<b>Role of the state</b>	Medium-to-high level of autonomy	Medium-to-high level of autonomy
<b>Trust in society</b>	Low-to-medium	High
<b>Power relations</b>	Skewed	Balanced
<b>Population size</b>	High	Low
<b>Institutions</b>	Discontent and lack of trust in government	Discontent due to lack of opportunities
<b>Culture</b>	Conservative	Relatively progressive

Both Vendola and Jakobsen can be considered *transformational* leaders (Table 2) who led their respective teams and received *legitimacy* from their followers using their values and ideas (*ideational–moral authority*) and charisma (*charismatic authority*) (Laing, 2013). However, it is worth highlighting how Vendola and Jakobsen were able to build their successful political actions on different *properties* and specific types of leadership. Vendola leveraged *actor properties* such as a vision of a possible and original regional future, bottom-up legitimation, rhetorical skills, and charisma. He was seen as a popular leader capable of mobilising the progressive and youth electorate and benefitting from the support of grassroots movements to implement a series of successful policy measures in various sectors and areas (e.g., culture, tourism, renewable energy, social innovation, science and technology). In contrast, Alf E. Jakobsen’s action mainly benefitted from *actor properties* such as recognised exceptional political talent, reputation, charisma, strong regional vision, and long experience leading to a wide network of contacts. Compared to Vendola, he represents a more traditional politician affiliated with one Norway’s major political parties (the Labour Party). Jakobsen was able to mobilize his broad relational network to bridge multiple scales (from local to international) and create a positive environment for diversification of the regional economy from traditional fisheries to the newly created petroleum industry. The political actions conducted by Jakobsen could be likened to the broader concept of ‘institutional entrepreneurship’ (i.e., shaping the ‘rules of the game’ and enabling the emergence of new innovative players in the oil and gas sector; see Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020).

Two politicians who adopt the same *transformational* approach to leadership, but with different characteristics and *properties*, can produce differential positive outcomes in regions characterised by

different geographical, socioeconomic, and institutional settings. These empirical findings seem to confirm the importance of the type of agents studied and how some political leaders, possessing a diverse combination of *properties* (knowledge, networks and resources), can represent particularly powerful regional actors and drive change in differently structured regional systems.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Vendola’s and Jakobsen’s main goal/political action, leadership style and actor properties.

	Vendola	Jakobsen
<b>Main goal/ political action</b>	Making Apulia a more modern region via three main axes: social and technological innovation, tourism and culture, and the environment	Persuading the local population about the need to enhance the regional economy through diversification from fisheries to the oil and gas sector
<b>Leadership style</b>	Transformational	Transformational
<b>Actor properties</b>	Vision, bottom-up legitimation, charisma, rhetorical skills	Political talent, experience, reputation, extensive networking, vision, charisma

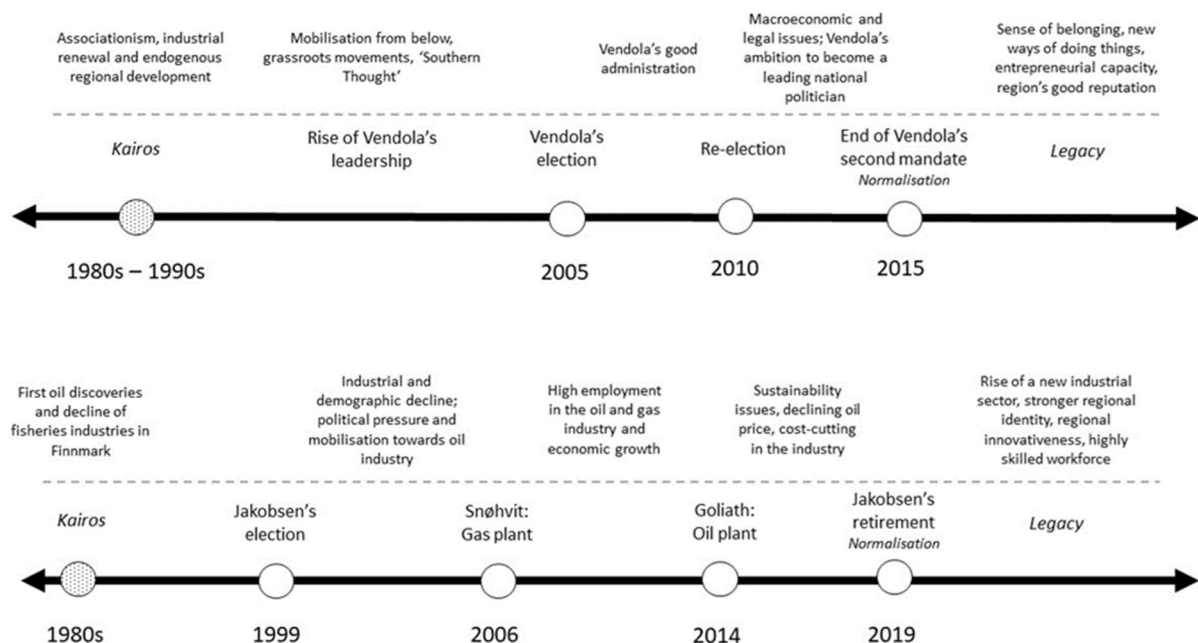
To integrate time into our analysis, we rely on the morphogenetic approach (Archer, 1995) and path tracing (Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2023). According to the morphogenetic approach theorized by Archer (1995), agents arise in pre-existing social structures, which can be modified by the agents themselves through their purposive actions. This generally occurs in a process referred to as ‘temporality’, which involves three main sequential stages: structural conditioning, social interaction and structural elaboration, the latter of which is similar to structural change or, *legacy* (i.e., what tangibly and intangibly remains in a region as the effect of the action carried out by a political leader). The approach used by Archer (1995) allows for capturing the causal relationship between agents and structural modification and can be interestingly complemented by path tracing. This is a new methodological tool that allows researchers to identify the main phases in new development paths, and the strategies carried out by the targeted agents, through the identification of distinct periods between critical junctures (Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2023). A timeline allows us to highlight the relevance of time in the narration of how political actions and policy initiatives carried out by eminent agents in regional development, such as political leaders, can drive change in different contexts.

In short, the ‘opportunity space’ (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020)—*kairos* in our analytical model—can be identified in the decline of the fishery industry and simultaneous oil exploration and discovery in the mid-1980s in the Norwegian case. On the contrary, these preconditions are represented by some positive



development processes that the Southern Italian region had already experienced in the previous decades (e.g., the emergence of new industries, endogenous development, and socioeconomic movements). The political action carried out by the targeted *transformational* leaders led to great changes in the two regions, with tangible outcomes in the rise of a new industrial sector in Finnmark and in the modernisation of a region with underperforming development, such as Apulia. The *normalisation* process in Finnmark coincided with the drop in oil prices in 2014, which began to cast doubt on the future of the industry in Norway, and the retirement of Alf E. Jakobsen in 2019. Conversely, the first signals of *normalisation* in Apulia were observed as early as Nichi Vendola's second mandate (2010–2015), partly due to macroeconomic circumstances and legal issues, but mainly due to his ambition to become a leading politician at the national level, which seemed to detract attention from the region he was governing. Finally, Jakobsen's and Vendola's *legacies* were embodied in visible or easily measurable aspects such as new regional sector, technology districts and higher employment rates, but also in 'softer' institutional aspects, such as a sense of belonging, identity, and entrepreneurial spirit. This suggests that the concept of *legacy* we have introduced might go beyond the established way in which development paths are conceptualised in the economic geography literature (e.g., Isaksen and Trippel, 2016). The critical events and main phases leading from *kairos* to *normalisation* and *legacy* in Apulia and Finnmark are graphically illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure 2.** Critical events and main phases leading to a regional change in Apulia and Finnmark: From *kairos* to *normalisation* and *legacy* (key events are highlighted by circles).



## 6. Concluding remarks

We argue that political leadership has received too little attention in the regional development literature. Although TCA and place-based leadership emphasize how to orchestrate efforts among groups of actors, this approach has given limited consideration to political leaders and their leadership. Our contribution indicates how place-based leadership processes can be spearheaded by talented, skilled, and powerful political leaders. We developed an analytical model that highlights the main *properties* that actors possess: knowledge, networks and resources. We discussed how *actor properties* interact with the institutional context in which political leaders operate and the various steps leading from their *legitimacy* to the *legacy* of their political action. The empirical investigation of two case studies in peripheral regions characterised by different socioeconomic and institutional contexts demonstrate how specific powerful actors at the meso-level (i.e., distinctive and talented political leaders who possess different combinations of vision, experience, competence, charisma, skills, networking and rhetorical abilities; see Wanna, 2014) play a key role in regional development by acting as critical agents.

The Italian and Norwegian case studies on human agency and political leadership support and reinforce the concept of *legacy*, which entails a broader conceptualisation of regional development and can materialise in many different tangible and intangible outcomes. On some occasions, ‘what remains’ in a region after the political action and the policy measures implemented by a leader transcends traditional views and existing categories of regional development (e.g., Isaksen and Trippl, 2016).

Our paper allows us to argue that political leaders as agents and their leadership as a regional phenomenon should be carefully considered and studied accordingly by economic geographers and regional scientists interested in determining how agency functions in regional development processes.

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