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Comparative Local Government Research: Theoretical Concepts and Empirical Findings from a European Perspective

Ellen Wayenberg and Sabine Kuhlmann

Abstract This chapter provides an overview on analytical key-concepts and outcomes of comparative local government research. It focuses on local government systems in Europe and their reforms from a cross-countries and overtime perspective. This chapter presents various frameworks that have been put forward in order to capture the multi-faced institutional developments at the local level of government and thus highlights the progress that has been made so far in comparative local government research, conceptually, analytically, as well as empirically. Two examples of local government reforms are analyzed, one from a longitudinal perspective, the other based on a cross-countries approach. This chapter concludes with some reflections on a possible future research agenda for the comparative study of local government.

44.1 INTRODUCTION

Local government reforms are one of a country's main types of reform (Camyar 2010, 139). In line with Pollitt and Bouckaert, they can be defined as embracing “all deliberate changes to [local] governments with the objective

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of getting them (in some sense) to run better” (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Since the 1950s, many of these changes have been debated, announced and/or executed all over Europe (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016). In this chapter, we want to give an overview on the analysis of local government reforms from a cross-countries comparative perspective. Our aim is twofold: on the one hand we want to outline some analytical key-concepts and prominent frameworks for the study of local government systems and reforms across countries. On the other hand, we want to provide some emblematic empirical insights into the actual reform implementation and outcomes, taking the starting conditions of various local government systems into account. To this end, we first present some influential typologies of local government systems (Page 1991; Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016) and local government reforms (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016; Garcea and LeSage 2005) put forward in the pertinent literature (Sects. 44.2 and 44.3). Secondly, we provide two examples for the comparative analysis of local government reforms, one taking an longitudinal perspective focusing on the example of structural reform in Flanders; the other pursuing a cross-countries approach picking the case of territorial reforms in Europe (Sect. 44.4). Finally, we draw some conclusion and give an outlook to the future research agenda (Sect. 44.5).

44.2 LOCAL GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS: STARTING CONDITIONS OF REFORMS

44.2.1 *The Dualistic Centralism-Localism Perspective in the Comparative Study of Local Governments*

Legal subordination is one of local government’s intrinsic features. It dominated the normative-legalistic way of looking down upon local reforms that featured the study until the late 1980s. Typical for this classic reform perspective is to assume central government as omnipotent because it decides upon local government’s ultimate status in society. For decades, that status was one of an autonomous government or a central agent depending upon the center’s decision to grant local government a constitutional right to exist or not (organizational variable), legal omni-competence or not (functional variable) or the legal right(s) to gain a high level of direct income or not (financial variable). Due to a reform, local government could either become more or less subordinate to its central counterpart, resulting in a continuation or a fundamental turnaround of its current status. A change of the last type was seldom observed during the first decades after WW II.¹ Despite a lot of changes to local government, there is no example of a European country then switching from a constitutional regime to an ultra vires one or vice versa (Norton 1997, 14).² The reforms implemented usually turned out to follow the path already taken a long time ago. A clear case is local government in Britain that experienced further increase in its central grant funding since the war. This development has been interpreted repeatedly as an increase in local governments’ role to act as central government agents (Leach and Percy-Smith 2001, 212; Rhodes 1992, 320).

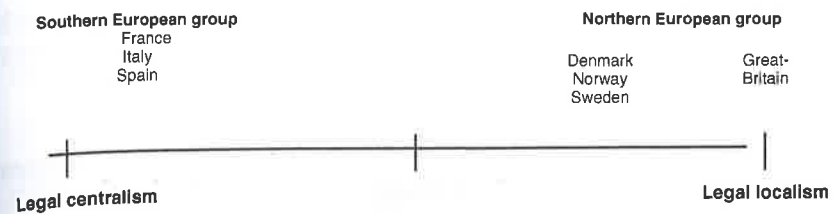


Fig. 44.1 Western European countries scaled according to Page’s regulation variable (1991) Source Page (1991)

The legal centralism-localism perspective in the comparative study of local government systems and reforms, introduced by Edward Page (1991), proceeds from the assumption that the ‘regulation’ in the intergovernmental system is a crucial factor for the actual functioning of local institutions and their reforms. From this conceptual viewpoint, local government systems can be clustered according to the predominant style of regulation and institutional/legal setting of the intergovernmental system as tending more to a regime of legal centralism or legal localism, leading to the well-known (yet in recent years increasingly debated) analytical distinction between a Southern and a Northern European country group as visualized in Fig. 44.1. Members of the former group, typically belonging to the Napoleonic administrative tradition, are traditionally dealing with a high degree of centrally driven bureaucratic regulation implying a strong involvement of central government in detailed issues of local decisions. Such far-reaching intervention of the central level into local affairs is minimized in countries of the latter group that primarily have to do with statutory regulation and that traditionally enjoy higher-levels of local autonomy (Page 1991, 36).

The centralisms-localism concept is basically a dualistic one that approaches local government within the context of a ‘dual polity’. Consequently, it implies a straightforward outcome of any municipal reform that could only result in either that local governments win or lose autonomy to the center because what is gained by one of them is interpreted as definitely lost by the other (Wayenberg 2006). However, from the 1990s onward, this dual polity assumption was challenged as studies revealed that central and local government could also simultaneously gain (and, by reverse, lose) from the same reform (Blom-Hansen 1999, 41–42; Stoker 1995). Moreover, the impact observed was not always attributed to all local governments in a country/region. Sometimes, a centrally introduced reform turns out to be more beneficial to certain municipalities than to others (Wayenberg 2004, 279–291). Hence, the changes locally undergone are more differentiated in nature and impact than a merely top-down view suggests. Municipalities do not all and always operate similarly under central reforms nor on their own initiative within the constraints of their discretionary sphere. Some are real forerunners when it comes to turning their organization or way of working around whilst others gladly settle into a back-seat. Precisely this differentiation does not always fit into the classic categorization of countries into a Northern or Southern—and by extension an Anglo

or Eastern—group when pointing out reform trends across Europe from an empirical-organizational point of view (Lowdnes 2001, 1958; Wollmann 2000, 50–51; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, 119–172).

44.2.2 A Multidimensional Typology for Comparative Local Government Research

A more recent typology for studying local government systems from a comparative perspective, put forward by Bouckaert and Kuhlmann (2016), takes up on the one hand the aspect of central-local regulation (see above) and combines it on the other hand with additional features of local government systems, namely the administrative culture and legal tradition of a country and the functional profile of local governments (see also Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Wollmann 2004; Heinelt and Hlepas 2006; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014). The basis of this typology is a sample of 28 European countries studied in a broader European research network on local public sector reforms (see Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016). Accordingly, European local government systems can be grouped roughly into six country clusters each marked by distinct combinations of institutional and cultural characteristics (see also Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014):

1. *Continental European Napoleonic type*: This type is marked first by the common Roman legal tradition and the importance of statutory law, and a powerful centralized bureaucracy. Traditionally, local governments are functionally weak (recent decentralization reforms notwithstanding) and a high number of (deconcentrated) locally operating field offices of the central state are characteristic (for key traits of this type see Ongaro 2009, 2010; Peters 2008).³ Within the Continental European Napoleonic type, a Southern European subgroup can be identified (cf. Kickert 2011, 107 et seq.), whose administrative practice is shaped by exceptionally strong politicization, clientelistic relations and political party patronage with regard to recruitment to the civil service (Sotiropoulos 2009, 408 et seq.; Kickert 2011, 107 et seq.).⁴
2. *Continental European Federal type*: This type displays an essential commonality with the Napoleonic systems because of the strong legalistic orientation of administration and the rule-of-law culture following the Roman law tradition. A crucial difference from the Napoleonic group is, however, the important role of the subnational decentralized level and the principle of subsidiarity. As in federal countries many subnational tasks fall with the intermediate (*Länder*/Canton) level, the percentage of local expenditures in these countries is partly lower than in some unitary countries (see Table 44.1).
3. *Nordic type*: The Scandinavian/Nordic countries display significant overlap with Continental European countries in their administrative profiles since these countries are also rooted in the Roman law tradition (cf. Pierre 2010; Wollmann 2014). However, there is a peculiarity concerning the openness of the recruiting and career system in the public service (and, specifically in Sweden, the explicit accessibility of the administrative

Table 44.1 Core-features of local government systems (selected countries)

Country	Decentralization		Territorial structures ^c	Executive leader/ mayor (1 = strong mayor; 0 = weak mayor)
	Functional responsibilities ^a	Discretion/Financial self-reliance ^b		
<i>Continental European federal type</i>				
Austria	15.5	2	3510	1
Germany	16.8	2	6690	1
Switzerland	24.3	3	2950	1
<i>Continental European Napoleonic type</i>				
Belgium	13.5	3	17,910	1
France	20.9	3	1720	1
Greece	5.6	2	33,600	1
Italy	31.3	3	7270	1
Spain	13.3	3	5430	1
<i>Nordic type</i>				
Denmark	64.3	2	55,480	0
Netherlands	33.6	1	36,890	0
Norway	33.3	3	11,020	0
Sweden	48.2	3	31,310	0
<i>Anglo-Saxon type</i>				
Ireland	10.3	3	37,310	
UK	27.8	1	1,39,480	0
<i>Central Eastern European type</i>				
Czech Rep.	27	1	1640	0
Hungary	14.9	1	3170	1
Lithuania	25.6	1	56,570	1
Poland	33	2	15,390	1
Slovakia	18.2	2	1870	1
<i>South Eastern European type</i>				
Bulgaria	18.1	2	29,090	1
Croatia	16.6	3	8014	1
Romania	23.9	1	6800	1

^a% of local expenditure out of total public expenditure

^bThe extent to which local government revenues are derived from own/local sources (taxes, fees, charges); based on the LAI 2014 (Ladner et al. 2015 with further explanations): sources yield less than 10% of total revenues: 0; 10–25%: 1; 25–50%: 2; more than 50%: 3

^c0 PT of municipalities

Source Adapted from (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016)

system by the citizens (freedom of information, external transparency, citizen participation, user democracy). Further commonalities with the Continental European federal nations are the subsidiarity principle in which responsibilities are allocated to the central and local administrative levels. These countries traditionally possess a highly decentralized administrative structure with politically and functionally strong local governments, and (apart from the Netherlands)⁵ a high degree of local autonomy.

4. *Anglo-Saxon type*: The countries with an Anglo-Saxon (and Anglo-American) administrative model belong to the public interest or civic

culture tradition. The cognitive and normative differences between the state and the social/economic sphere are not very pronounced and the crucial separation of the public and private legal sphere in Continental European administration is largely unknown in these countries. Local governments used to enjoy high levels of discretion and many functional responsibilities while staying comparatively weak in terms of local leadership. However, due to reforms they have lost this traditionally strong position in many respects.

5. The *Central Eastern European (CEE)*⁶ type is characterized by a quite comprehensive break with the former legacy of the socialist administrative system. Public administration is highly decentralized and local governments enjoy a fairly wide scope of functions provided by local authorities, yet with different degrees of fiscal discretion. In the wake of the system change in 1989, these countries have made much progress in the (re)establishment of the Continental European constitutional and administrative model. Another qualification must be made regarding the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) which resemble, in a number of features, the Nordic type (Vangas and Vilka 2003), specifically Lithuania as the CEE-country with the highest average population of municipalities (57,000), whereas others are much more fragmented.
6. *South Eastern European (SEE) Type*: Geographically, all countries of this cluster (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania, and Slovenia) are located in the Balkans (Swianiewicz 2014, 305; Koprić 2009). In institutional terms, too, the local government systems of this group show many similarities with the South European type (see above); for instance, the narrower scope of functional responsibilities and the strong position of the mayors. Compared to the cluster of CEE countries, the SEE type is characterized by lower fiscal discretion and a weaker institutional position of local governments. Public administration is generally marked by a still quite centralized unitary structure (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, 21). In some countries (e.g. Bulgaria, Romania), the administrative history was marked by highly centralist rules and the transformation process after 1990 initially determined by the post-communist elite.

Table 44.1 gives an overview on some key features of local government systems and relevant context conditions of local public sector reforms in the (groups of) countries under scrutiny.⁷

44.3 TYPOLOGIES OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS

Since World War II, European local governments have been subjected to multiple reforms (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016; Wollmann 2004; Kersting and Vetter 2004; Wollmann and Marcou 2010). In 1988, Dente and Kjellberg identified three commonalities among the local changes most

researched. On the basis of an extended literature review, they concluded that the reforms studied can usually be classified as dealing with “local government’s organizational structure, its decision-making process or its flow of financial resources” (Dente and Kjellberg 1988, 11). This focus is hardly surprising in the light of the then dominant and normative-legalistic approach of local government reform. In line with traditional public administration, this approach targeted legally anchored institutions, procedures and decision-making processes on the municipal level. All of them were—as subject of deliberative change—described extensively in order to find out “to which degree local government remained really ‘local’ i.e. [kept its] autonomy over local decisions.” (Page 1991, 1) After all, local autonomy was seen “as a good thing”. (McClellan 1996, 60) as it inherently valued liberty, democracy and efficiency. And precisely these values underscore local reforms up until present.

As early as the first half of the nineteenth century, the quest for liberty led to the installation of a layer of local government in most European nations, be it that “the liberty and autonomy emphasized in this regard were never meant to be an obstacle to the national government’s intrusion into local affairs [but] rather as a barrier against arbitrary interventions on the part of central authorities” (Kjellberg 1995, 42). Most reforms then introduced have been motivated on the basis of local government’s capacity to make more democratic and efficient choices than its higher-level counterparts. Over the centuries, local autonomy has thus evolved from a concept to emphasize a government’s liberty vis-à-vis others to one valuing government’s ability to act best in its own right. And precisely this turnaround was an important stimulus for the development of a new and more empirical-organizational approach of local government reforms as an addendum to a merely normative-legalistic one. That new approach flourished from the 1990s onward and clearly took account of a reform’s scope. After all, local government reforms vary from changes that target the local level as a whole to those that affect local government individually. Given the variety of trajectories and approaches of local-level reforms, different typologies have been suggested to analytically capture these institutional developments (see Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, 37–40; Kuhlmann and Wayenberg 2016, 4–7). Of course, students of comparative local government should be well aware of the fact that each typology is a theoretical construct, depends on the specific research perspective and is also often object of academic debates. In this chapter, we draw on two influential typologies which we reckon to be particularly productive—theoretically grounded as well as empirically informed—for the comparative study of local government reforms.

(1) The first typology is based on comparative research about local public sector reforms in 32 European countries and suggests four basic reform types, namely: territorial and functional rescaling; reorganization of local service

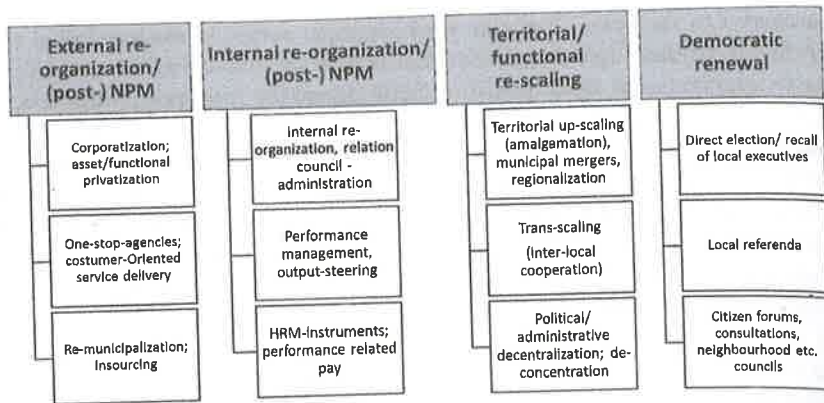


Fig. 44.2 Types of Local Government Reform I—Bouckaert and Kuhlmann Typology (2016) Source Adapted from Bouckaert and Kuhlmann (2016)

delivery; internal managerial reforms; democratic reforms (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016; see Fig. 44.2)

Territorial and functional rescaling: This type of reforms refers to both territorial upscaling (amalgamation) and/or trans-scaling (inter-local cooperation) of subnational jurisdictions. On the one hand, a group of countries can be identified in which national governments acted to reinforce the administrative efficiency of local government by way of territorial and demographic extension (Denmark, Sweden, and the UK; some northern parts of Germany; see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, 150). This country group is contrasted against a cluster of countries in which the small-scale, fragmented territorial structure of local government dominates (e.g. France, Italy, and Spain). In these countries, strategies (termed ‘trans-scaling’ by Baldersheim and Rose 2010) have been pursued that aim at ensuring the operative viability, even of very small-scale municipalities, by establishing inter-municipal bodies. In many countries, territorial rescaling entails measures of functional re-allocations of tasks between the level of government (Kuhlmann and Wayenberg 2016). In this regard, an overall trend of (political/administrative) decentralization was to be observed since the 1980s and a reverse movement of re-centralization, specifically in Southern Europe, after the global financial crisis of the 2010s is to be noted. Whether the reforms are more functional or whether they are more territorial or both, in any case they strongly affect the structures, processes, and actors of multi-level governance in the intergovernmental system (Ongaro 2015; Kuhlmann 2015).

Reorganization of local service delivery: Many local governments all over Europe have reorganized their structures, modes, and procedures of service delivery. Starting in the 1980s, New Public Management (NPM)-driven externalizations of local services to private or nonprofit providers (contracting out, functional/asset privatization, corporatization, competitive tendering)

were pursued. However, more recently, in some countries (e.g. France and Germany) and sectors (e.g. public utilities), a trend of post-NPM re-municipalization of previously externalized local functions is perceivable (Wollmann and Marcou 2010).

Internal managerial reforms: Internal reforms have also largely been guided by NPM ideas. Inspired by the concept of a customer friendly ‘service enterprise’ to be managed in a performance oriented manner (Schedler and Proeller 2000), many local governments have embarked on reform projects of internal reorganization, process re-engineering, new budgeting and accounting systems, performance management tools and human resource-related modernization.

Democratic reforms: This type of reforms involves a broad variety of (more or less novel) participatory instruments and tools of citizen involvement. Some of the reform approaches are directed at strengthening direct democratic participation (local referenda, direct election/recall of local executives). Others relate to new forms of participatory and cooperative democracy (citizens’ forums, youth/neighborhood councils, e-democracy) in order to allow residents to participate in public debates, by introducing consultations and more interactive and deliberative policy making.

(2) Taking the empirical case of Canada, another influential typology proposes five types of local government reforms, namely structural, jurisdictional, functional, financial, and internal governance/management reforms (Garcea and LeSage 2005). Garcea and LeSage explain these five types of local government reform as follows: (1) jurisdictional reform seeks to revise the authority and autonomy of local government relative to other tiers of government; (2) functional reform deals with changes in the formal and informal roles and responsibilities of local government; (3) financial reform tackles the expenditure and revenue dimensions of local government operations;

Table 44.2 Types of local government reform II—Garcea and LeSage—typology (2005)

Scope focus	Local level	Local government
Organizational structure	Structural reforms	Internal governance/management reforms
	(amalgamations, inter-municipal cooperation, ...)	(strategic planning, forms of direct democracy, ...)
Decision-making process	Functional reforms	
	(local government’s omni-competence, its tasks in specific domains, ...)	(local government’s use of its omni-competence, its task execution in specific domains, ...)
Flow of financial resources	Financial reforms	
	(higher-level funding, higher-level subsidies, ...)	(local taxes, direct income out of local service delivery, ...)

Source: Garcea and LeSage (2005)

(4) reform of the internal organization, administrative and managerial apparatus consists of revising the structure and functions of elected councils, the organization of administrative units, and asset and resource management; (5) structural reform embraces the reconfiguration of local government in terms of the number, types, and size of municipalities, quasi-municipalities, and municipal special purpose bodies (Garcea and LeSage 2005). This typology has been praised for its usefulness to countries with another local government system apart from Canada (Dollery and Robotti 2008) (Table 44.2).

44.4 ANALYZING LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS FROM A LONGITUDINAL AND CROSS-COUNTRY PERSPECTIVE

The following sections will provide two different examples of reform analyses that can be found in local government research. The first one refers to an in-depth and overtime (or longitudinal) analysis of institutional reform developments in one selected country/regional case, namely in Flanders (Belgium). This overtime approach is mainly focused on identifying typical institutional patterns for one specific case and tracing the reform developments over a longer period of time. The second example relates to a cross-countries comparative assessment of local public sector reforms based on a larger sample of countries and thus characterized by a higher level of abstraction and aggregation. In this analysis, the major emphasis is put on differences and similarities between countries and on the reasons that might explain divergence/convergence.

44.4.1 *Longitudinal Analysis of Reforms: The Example of Structural Reforms in Flemish Local Governments*

The following reform analysis of the 308 local governments in Flanders embraces the span width of structural reforms at the local level: running better⁸ is definitely the objective of the specific local government reform. In Belgium, the regional governments are key actors to reform local government. Throughout the different phases of state reform, they have gradually obtained more and more competencies regarding the local governments on their territory. In Flanders, located in the North of Belgium, the Flemish government showed itself very eager to use these competencies in order to get its 308 localities to improve their processes (Wayenberg 2006). In order to get a closer look of the recent account of structural reforms at the local level in Flanders, we use a threefold distinction between reform issues, reform initiatives announced and those actually taken (see Garcea and LeSage 2005). In its policy brief on internal affairs, the Flemish government clearly announces its initiatives to reform local government structurally during the upcoming legislative period (i.e. reform initiatives announced) as well as the issues that it actively considers for future structural reform (i.e. reform issues). More so, such a brief usually gives an overview of the policy realizations of the previous legislature period and

thus also gives an insight into the structural reforms that the (former) Flemish government has already implemented (i.e. reform initiatives taken). Hence, our choice for using a trilogy of reform issues, reform initiatives announced and those actually taken.

In the following, we focus our analysis on a 20-year period of four fully ended legislative terms of the Flemish government, i.e. 1995–1999, 1999–2004; 2004–2009; 2009–2014. In the following paragraphs, we chronologically review the four legislative periods, indicating major local level reforms of all types but primarily all (other) structural ones then issued, announced and/or taken for each period.

1995–1999: On June 20, 1995, the first directly elected Flemish government took office. It was a coalition government of Christian–Democrats and Socialists led by the Christian–Democrat politician Luc Van den Brande. The Socialist Kris Peeters was appointed as Minister for Internal Affairs, including for local government. In its coalition agreement, the then Flemish government immediately expressed its intention to close a pact with the local level in search of optimal intergovernmental relations (Peeters 1995, 4). That pact was finally signed on 8th March 1999 and contained no less than 63 actions points primarily aimed at reforming the Flemish government's supervision over local government and local funding. But their implementation did not take place as the Flemish legislature period ended in June 1999. Nevertheless, the pact is seen as an important initiative of the then Flemish government as it paved the way for future local government reform. The same goes for the Committee on Internal Affairs (CBO) that the then Flemish government installed (Sauwens 1999, 6; Wayenberg 2004, 168). After all, this study committee produced the very first inventory of ongoing local level debates and issues including several structural ones. These were concerned with the possible ways of working between a core city and its suburbs (city-regional cooperation), the need to strengthen the (potential) role locally played by district and neighborhood councils (sub-municipal decentralization) and the urge to specify the sector-specific collaboration of municipalities (Peeters 1995, 13–16). This urge could be met by means of a legislative proposal on inter-municipal cooperation but no concrete initiative to this end was taken during this first Flemish term.

1999–2004: After the elections of June 13, 1999, a new Flemish government took office. It was led by Patrick Dewael (VLD—'Flemish Liberal Democrats') who was followed up by his fellow party member Bart Somers in 2003. During this legislative term, various other ministers were replaced including the one for internal affairs. Initially, Johan Sauwens (VU—'People's Union') held this office but he was followed up by Paul Van Grembergen in 2001. Apart from the Flemish Liberal Democrats and the People's Union, the Socialists (SP) and Greens (Agalev) made up the then coalition government. Shortly after taking office, minister-president Dewael launched the so-called 'core task debate' for Flanders. Two questions were at the fore of

that debate: firstly, what tasks does the Flemish government have vis-à-vis the private sector and secondly, how should the governmental tasks be divided among the Flemish, provincial and local level as the three democratically elected layers of government? (Sauwens 1999, 18) To deal with this second and intergovernmental question, numerous debate groups were set up as all sectorial policy fields were involved. Finally, the intergovernmental debate resulted in the signature of the so-called 'core task agreement' on April 25, 2003 (Keulen 2004, 7). So again, closure took place near the end of the Flemish legislative term and no concrete reform initiatives resulted from this agreement at the time (Wayenberg 2004, 169). However, various other major local government reforms were initiated during that same legislative period, including two structural ones. First of all, the Flemish government launched a new decree on inter-municipal cooperation that was parliamentary approved of on July 6, 2001. From then onward, local governments could use new legal forms to frame their mutual cooperation, without involvement of the private sector. This reform built upon the knowledge gathered via two smaller initiatives announced at the beginning of the then legislative term i.e. to financially support pilot projects on alternative ways of inter-municipal cooperation and to start political consultation on their legal anchoring (Sauwens 1999, 14–17). Secondly, to facilitate public-private partnerships on the local and supra-local level, another legal framework was voted upon on July 18, 2003, however without any far-reaching impact on the local level according to the director of the local representative organization.

2004–2009: The 2004 elections thoroughly rearranged Flanders' political landscape. A new Flemish government took office on July 20, 2004, led by Yves Leterme (CD&V—Christian-Democratic and Flemish Party). It consisted of five political parties, tied in three cartels between respectively the CD&V (Christian-Democratic and Flemish party) and NV-A (New Flemish Alliance); the Open-Vld (Open Flemish Liberals and Democrats) and Vivant; the SP-a (Social Democratic Party) and Spirit (Social Liberal Party). Kris Peeters replaced Yves Leterme in 2007 as Flemish minister-president whilst Marino Keulen (Open Vld) was the Minister of Internal Affairs during the whole of this term. This Flemish government launched the first ever Flemish local government decree in 2005. Undoubtedly, this decree is a milestone in local government's recent history as it legally anchored a whole series of New Public Management (NPM)-instruments (Wayenberg 2006, 48). Furthermore, the decree granted municipalities the possibility to voluntarily merge, be it that no request to do so was locally filed during the legislative term (Bourgeois 2009, 15). Other issues concerning local government's scale were also on the agenda. More specifically, the Flemish government ordered evaluative research with regard to earlier decisions taken in Belgium to up- as well as downscale local government. This gave insight into the effects respectively experienced across Flanders of the 2001 decree on inter-municipal cooperation as well as in Antwerp as, to the present day, the only Belgian city where

district councils are in place. However, in the aftermath of these studies, no other reforms were centrally announced or implemented.

2009–2014: A new Flemish government took office on July 13, 2009. It consisted of three parties—CD&V, NV-A and SP-a—under the direction of Kris Peeters (CD&V) as Minister-President. Geert Bourgeois (NV-A) was the then Minister of Internal Affairs. Shortly after taking office, the Flemish government started to prepare a 'Green Paper' on internal state reform. That paper was finalized on July 23, 2010 and, no less than a year later, was completed by a 'White Paper', full of ideas and proposals about the future role, relevance and performance of Flanders' provincial and local governments (Homans 2014, 7). Amongst other issues, this endeavor concerned Flanders' institutional thickness, referring to the numerous intergovernmental and mostly single-purpose partnerships and arrangements on the sub-regional level. In fact, that level is to be situated in-between the provincial and local one and thus forms a fourth layer of governmental activity in Flanders next to the Flemish, provincial and municipal one. A lot of these partnerships and arrangements are set up as an initiative of one or more provincial and/or local governments. However, there were also various examples of such collaborative structures launched by the Flemish government itself, often in specific policy fields and (also) in return for subcentral subsidization. Nevertheless, the then Flemish Minister of Internal Affairs Bourgeois defined the 'thickness'-issue primarily as a local problem, facing local governments with various negative consequences. Concrete examples include the local aldermen who had to run from one partnership meeting to another, the local councils that were questioning the efficient and effective spending of local subsidies granted to these partnerships and the top civil servants who lacked an oversight of all the arrangements in which their local government is involved. Minister Bourgeois took the initiative of a so-called regional screening, thus mapping more than 2000 ways of intergovernmental collaboration across Flanders. He also announced a legal framework to streamline their (then and future) prevalence but did not realize a concrete legislative reform to this end (Bourgeois 2009, 20; Homans 2014, 14). In fact, the same goes for inter-municipal cooperation. Motivated toward administrative simplification, Bourgeois planned to legally adapt the 2001 decree on this structural issue but did not realize this intention at the time. Clearly, he scored better with regard to municipal amalgamations as he arranged financial as well as practical support for municipalities deciding to merge voluntarily by January 1, 2013. However, no voluntary municipal mergers took place. (Bourgeois 2009, 26; Homans 2014, 12).⁹

The above analysis brings to the fore that running local government better from a structural point of view clearly dominates as the Flemish government's policy priority for its local counterpart. In short, this priority embraces the idea of, on the one hand, locally working on a bigger scale as well as, on the other hand, leaving the final decision to do so (or not) to the municipality's

discretion. Moreover, this interpretation is strongly anchored as our analysis covers a 20-year period during which the Flemish region has been governed by political parties covering the left and right side of the political spectrum. Together, these findings—a dominant reform concept that has been ruling for years now—allow us to conclude that Flanders has been experiencing a structural reform trend though, as in other southern European countries, trans- instead of upscaling local government has been at the order of the day.

44.4.2 Cross-Countries Analysis of Reforms: The Example of Territorial Rescaling in European Local Governments

In most European countries, the municipal level was historically characterized by a small-sized and fragmented structure, which often extends back to the late Middle Ages, and originated in the territorial landscape of parish communities. On the one hand, a group of countries can be identified in which national governments acted to reinforce the administrative efficiency of local government by way of territorial and demographic extension (enlargement in scale). While the democratic potential of the local government level was meant to be retained, if not enhanced, the improvement of the administrative-economic performance (*efficiency*) was given priority as a crucial frame of reference (John 2010, 106 et seq. for the United Kingdom). This strategic thrust, also termed 'upscaling' (cf. Baldersheim and Rose 2010, 20) was a basic guideline of the territorial reforms that following World War II were carried out in England/UK, Sweden and the German *Länder*. In the international comparative literature, one therefore speaks of a Northern European reform model (Norton 1994, 40).

In contrast with this Northern European country group, stands a group of countries in which the small-sized fragmented territorial structure of local government whose origin often dates back to the eighteenth century has largely remained unchanged. Reform attempts that the governments in these countries, too, embarked upon during the 1970s largely failed, as these reform measures were made dependent on the consent of the municipalities concerned and, as such, local approval was not obtained. Since France and Italy are prominent examples of this country group, the comparative literature refers to these as the 'Southern European' reform model. In these countries, strategies (termed 'trans-scaling' by Baldersheim and Rose 2010) have been pursued that aim at ensuring the operative viability even of the very small-scale municipalities, by establishing inter-municipal bodies (in French: *intercommunalité*). The creation of such institutionalized forms of inter-municipal cooperation and institutional symbioses can be seen as a response to and a 'substitute' for the lack of formal territorial reforms through municipal amalgamation.

The question arises as to whether, to which extent and why the territorial reform developments in European local governments exhibits convergent

or divergent patterns (see also Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Swianiewicz 2010). With regard to territorial and population size, the municipalities still show large, and in some cases even palpable differences. This is particularly conspicuous in the average population size of the municipalities in Europe (between 1640 and 1,39,000 across Europe) as well as, for example, in the proportion of municipalities with fewer than 5000 inhabitants (variance between 96 and 2 or 0% across Europe; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014, 168). Thus, territorial structure does not signal convergence but, on the contrary, reveals persistent differences and divergence. However, within certain country clusters cross-country trends (convergence) can be recognized. On the one hand, countries possessing the Northern European reform profile (England, Denmark, Sweden, and some German *Länder*) demonstrate convergence among each other insofar as in some cases, large-scale amalgamation of existing small local governments has been effected, resulting in demographically enlarged municipalities ('upscaling'; Baldersheim and Rose 2010). In a reform wave that has set in since 2000, Southern European countries such as Greece as well as the Central Eastern European EU-accession countries of Bulgaria and Lithuania have moved closer to the Northern European territorial reform profile. This has been additionally pushed by the financial and eurozone crisis and the pressure from the EU. However, these countries, albeit within an overall convergent development, still reveal significant, and in part, glaring differences in the average population size of their municipalities—from 1,40,000 (England) to 10,700 (Greece).

On the other hand, convergence becomes apparent within the group of countries belonging to the Southern European reform pattern (France, Italy, and the majority of the Central and Eastern European countries) in that (almost) no territorial reforms on the municipal level have been realized by way of amalgamation, thus leaving their historically fragmented territorial structure unchanged, while putting in place a layer of inter-municipal formations for their operative support ('trans-scaling'; Baldersheim and Rose 2010; see also Hulst and Montfort 2007). While these countries display an overall (convergent) Southern European pattern, their average population size is significantly different (e.g., 1720 inhabitants in France and 7250 inhabitants in Italy). Whether the financial crisis and the EU-induced pressure will prompt the 'Southern countries' to move more closely toward Northern European type upscaling, thus resulting in convergence, yet remains to be seen. Indications of this can be noticed inter alia in Greece's and Portugal's territorial reforms.

The question remains as to which factors have impinged on the respective convergence or divergence. The dynamics of the territorial development that in the Northern European countries was directed at the 'enlargement in scale' of the local government units was essentially driven by the fact that in these countries the parliaments have, constitutionally and politically, the power to enforce a local government territorial structure envisaged through binding

legislation, with reference to the overriding 'common good', even in the face of rejection or resistance by the affected (small) municipalities. This parliamentary decision-making power harks back to institutional history and political culture in the multi-level system of these countries, according to which local government level was assigned a crucial role in the realization, on the local level, of the national welfare and intervention state. The understanding and willingness to subordinate local self-determination ultimately to the parliamentary decision-making powers is entrenched in the political and parliamentary culture of these countries.

One determining, conceptual driving force (framing) of territorial reforms was to enhance the improvement of the operative planning, action and coordination capacity of the local authorities through their territorial and demographic 'enlargement'. This impulse came to bear on the reform wave of the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by the 'rationalist' zeitgeist, as well as in the recent round of reforms. The different scope and speed of reforms reflect and are influenced by the different goals and intentions of the relevant (party-) political actors (in the sense of actor-centered institutionalism).

By contrast, the continuity and persistence of the local government territorial structure in the Southern European countries can be largely accounted for by the path-dependent constitutional, political and political-cultural assumption that territorial changes by way of amalgamating existing municipalities can be achieved only with the consent of the affected local government units and their population. This 'voluntary' principle (*volontariat*), which has proven to be an ongoing obstacle to territorial change in local political practice, is premised on the conviction, rooted in institutional history and political culture, that the realization of the welfare state is essentially assigned to the (Napoleonic) centralized state administration. At the same time, the function of the local government level is, first of all focused on serving as the political arena and site for the local citizens to define, express and 'live' their local identity. In addition, the 'voluntary' principle is anchored in the institutionally guaranteed influence exercised by (for example, in France) the local mayor as defender of the territorial status quo also on the national level (for a detailed comparative country analysis, see Baldersheim and Rose 2010).

A rupture or even a deviation from a 'path-dependent' institutional trajectory occurs if and when the relevant actors (in the sense of actor-centered institutionalism) feel prompted to perform a political or institutional 'act of strength', for instance in a situation that they deem to be a deep crisis of the existing territorial or organizational structures. This kind of situation can be triggered by urgent external pressures, such as an economic or fiscal crisis (e.g., the fiscal crises burst in Southern European countries since 2009/2010) or demographic problems. For example, the territorial reform drive in the East German *Länder* has been propelled by the perception that the existing small municipalities were increasingly 'bleeding empty' demographically, politically, economically and financially. In addition, the operative

and political functionality of inter-municipal formations has been increasingly called into question because of their high coordination, cooperation and transaction costs. In France, similar assessments and motives guided the reform project of 2010, one that hinged on the functional, financial and democratic strengthening of the *communautés* as a pragmatic move toward a territorial reform 'without explicit amalgamation' (Marcou 2010), thus making for an all but gradual deviation from the path-dependently prevalent *intercommunalité*. The Italian government, too, saw the need to react to the mounting budgetary crisis and pressure from the EU Commission by putting together its reform package of 2012 regarding specifically the provincial level and the metropolitan cities.

44.5 CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

In this chapter, we have shown that comparative local government research has made much progress over the last decades, conceptually, analytically, as well as empirically. Reflecting the increasing variety and intensity of local public sector reforms, various typologies and analytical frameworks have been put forward in order to capture these multi-faced institutional developments at the local level of government. Comparative researchers, today, have a differentiated repertoire of analytical tools and concepts which they can adopt to their specific research objectives. Furthermore, the empirical knowledge on various types, trajectories, and driving forces of local-level reforms has been extended significantly in recent years, which allows for a better understanding of reforms in different country contexts and for an empirically grounded theory building. Finally, we have shown that comparative local reform analyses can take advantage from complementary analytical perspectives and methodological approaches. Cross-country comparisons that operate with larger samples of country-cases provide for more generalizable conclusions on reform trends, causes, and effects, however on a quite high level of abstraction and aggregation. By contrast, in-depth country-case analyses over longer periods of time generate valuable insights into the basic core-mechanisms, motives, (shifting) rationales and crucial patterns of reform processes. The combination of both perspectives appears most promising as for the further advancement of empirical research as for theory building in future comparative local government studies. From our perspective, scholars in Europe and beyond should concentrate in particular on the following three key areas meant to constitute a possible future research agenda for the comparative study of local government (reforms):

Enhancement of comparative knowledge and integration of scattered data bases
Expanding and enriching the substantial knowledge of the structures, functions and cultural features of different local government systems—let alone those outside Europe—is still needed. Conducting comparisons of local

government systems and reforms still requires 'substantially greater contextual and institutional knowledge' (Peters 1996, 18), but also comparative international data sets and appropriate indicators (see Ladner et al. 2015 as an excellent example). Hitherto, databases on local public sector reforms have been largely fragmented, incomparable, incoherent, nationally scattered and confined in their methodological approach. Future research should remedy those deficits and generate coherent data bases for systematic comparison with a view to streamlining analytical approaches and synthesizing research outcomes using methodological triangulation (qualitative/quantitative techniques). A major goal should be to establish new sets of comparative (descriptive, explanatory, and evaluative) knowledge on local government systems and reforms and to integrate the fragmented research activities in this area of investigation.

Theory and concept building

What has been claimed for political science research on public administration in general (Benz 2003; Bogumil and Jann 2009, 302) is all the more true for comparative local government research: a stronger theoretical foundation and concept formation are both desirable and needed for further sharpening the profile of this research direction and for enhancing its recognition in social science. However, because of its trans- and interdisciplinary orientation and of its international perspective, the comparative study of local government is faced with even higher barriers than in other comparative subdisciplines in social science. This makes concept formation and theory building more difficult. Furthermore, the various comparative research strands in administrative science should be linked in order to generate mutual synergy effects for further theory formation. So far, the researchers in the different fields—comparative local government, civil service and in administrative elites or Europeanization research—still take too little notice of each other. However, as their empirical perceptions are focused on and restricted to their respective specific levels or areas of the administrative system (EU, ministerial administration, local government), the scope of their conclusions and theories is bound to remain limited. In light of this, it has been rightly criticized that comparative administration research is too fragmented in terms of content and geographical coverage (for instance between 'Western comparative public administration' and 'non-Western/development CPA'; cf. Raadschelders 2011, 832) as well as in terms of methods. Thus, for the further conceptual and theoretical development in comparative local government research a stronger exchange between the different research fields and researchers is urgently needed. For this reason, the dialogue and exchange between researchers and practitioners should be intensified.

Institutional performance and effects of reforms

The comparative analysis of local-level reform effects, hence the evaluation of local government reforms, is still conceptually, methodologically and empirically underdeveloped, although attempts are still being made to redress this problem (Jreisat 2011, 834). Nonetheless, in the national and international context, systematic impact analyses regarding development and outcome of local government reforms and performance comparisons of various reform trajectories remain a rarity. Therefore, the question of how different local government systems and reforms affect local performance rates high on the agenda of future research. Hereby, the plurality of evaluation criteria of local action (e.g. legality, efficiency, democratic legitimacy, professional quality, etc.) should be taken into account. These, unfortunately, are often weighted differently in the individual national and local administrative contexts and often cannot be simultaneously optimized (trade off). Moreover, such evaluative analyses should also consider the transaction costs of changes in order to reach a realistic cost-benefit balance of administrative reforms (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2006). In sum, extending the focus of comparative local government research on the evaluation of reforms will be of great importance as this will, for one, add a hitherto largely ignored dimension to the research agenda. Second, it will generate information that is empirically grounded on the strengths and weaknesses of different local government models, reform approaches and measures, thus providing knowledge that can be used by political and administrative actors in the European, national and subnational contexts in their decision-making on administrative reforms.

NOTES

1. An example of such a switch: at the beginning of the 1980s, Italian local government experienced a substantial reduction in central control exercised by the prefects = a reform interpreted as a switch from an agent to a non-agent status for local government (Dente 1988, p. 183).
2. In a constitutional regime, local government's right to exist and function is legally anchored in the constitution whereas this right is shaped throughout central government's legislation when the ultra-vires principle applies.
3. Regarding Belgium, which has meanwhile been quasi-federalized, a differentiation between the Flemish region (with a more Nordic tradition) and the Walloon region (with a more Latin/Napoleonic tradition) must be made. However, for purposes of simplification we group Belgium with the Continental European Napoleonic cluster.
4. Although not belonging to Continental Europe geographically, Turkey displays many features of the Continental European Napoleonic administrative profile (Southern European sub-group) and is therefore classified with this group (country data taken from Turc et al. in this volume).
5. Although the Netherlands are characterized by a historic legacy of the Napoleonic tradition (Lidström 1996) it also shows many similarities with the Nordic

countries (see John 2001), which have been further strengthened by way of recent (decentralization) reforms (see Bouckaert and Kuhlmann 2016).

6. We distinguish two types of Eastern European systems by combining parts of the more differentiated typology proposed by Swianiewicz (2014) that consist of five Eastern European sub-groups.
7. For some countries we have taken updated numbers (as far as available) in order to take major recent reforms into account: (1) *Greece*: average population significantly increased after the Kallikratis Reform of 2010 (from 10.750 in 2010 to 33.600 in 2015); (2) *Hungary* has witnessed a significant decline in functional responsibilities due to re-centralization processes (from 25,6 in 2011 to 14,9 in 2013); (3) *Latvia*: average population significantly increased after the reforms of 2010 (from 4.340 in 2010 to 16.760 in 2015).
8. Supra definition of local government reform in introduction.
9. On top of all this, Bourgeois put another scale issue on the agenda. After all, he explored how the Flemish government could support the Flemish and French cities of Kortrijk, Lille and Doornik to better collaborate transnationally (Bourgeois 2009, 44). However, we do not take this issue into account as it concerns specific local governments and no a level-wide matter according to our definition of structural reform (supra Table 44.2).

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