Towards the strong and entrepreneurial mayor? Comparing local political leadership in Europe

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Over the last few decades and in many European countries, local government went through an era of transformation[1]. One of the areas in which much activity in terms of discourse, reform and change occurred is political leadership. The latter is than perceived as one of the main targets in need of adaptation to cope with the altering demands towards localities. Although leadership thus often is the talk of town evoking intuitive notions of innovation, trust, direction and manageability adding the prefix political isn't particularly helpful to univocally conceive it.

Understanding contemporary local political leadership

Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a number of basic elements to outline the notion of leadership. First, leadership refers to a specific type of relation. It usually stems from a limited number of individuals to a larger counterpart whereby the former shape the action space of the latter. Leadership is asymmetrical to the extent that it involves the power to direct others to make things happen. Followers are hence of equal importance as leaders, but the latter take the initiative, provide linkage and have the ability to mould the framework of connection. Second, in leadership power usually turns into influence as leaders and followers share common or at least compatible goals. Leadership thus inserts agreed direction and purpose in control. Applied to the political sphere, leadership assumes a degree of control over the authoritative distribution of values in society or more specific the outcome of public policy decisions[2].

With the development of the modern state, political leadership has become institutionalized and is often vested in the executive branch of government. As such and together with laymen and administrators, it is one of the core type of actors found in almost every system of local government, regardless of place or period. It is rather in its particular setup and the mutual relationship between the actors mentioned that the specificity of the *intragovernmental* system lays[3].

Precisely in this relationship many of the reformist efforts for local political leadership can be found. As we shall elaborate below and from a comparative perspective, many countries have witnessed a strengthening of local executive institutions (often to the disadvantage of their legislative

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[1] Bas Denters/Larry Rose, Towards Local Governance?, in: Bas Denters/Larry Rose (Hrsg.), Comparing Local Governance. Trends and Developments, London 2005, S. 246-262.

[2] Kristof Steyvers/Thomas Bergström/Henry Bäck/Marcel Boogers/José Ruano De La Fuente/Linze Schaap, From Princeps to President? Comparing Local Political Leadership Transformation, in: Local Government Studies, 34(2) (2008), S. 131-146.

[3] Poul-Erik Mouritzen/James Svara, Leadership at the Apex. Politicians and Administrators in Western Local Governments, Pittsburgh 2002.

counterparts) with a tendency towards a model that is commonly known as that of the strong mayor. Much of the literature in political science has focused on discerning the reasons for and the substance of this institutional tendency[4]. We argue that it should be complemented with conjointly considering two additional elements.

First, leadership essentially is a behavioural characteristic. Hence, direction ultimately geared towards action in carrying out a number of key-roles or tasks that have also been challenged over the last few decades. When needs and demands emerge outside routine processes, leaders provide diagnosis and prescribe the course of action (providing strategic direction in agenda-setting) and mobilize those involved (building and/or maintaining networks and coalitions that are crucial to turn political vision into policy reality) in ensuring task accomplishment[5]. Second, leadership is also situational. The extent to which leaders are able to influence public decision-making to their own ambitions and styles is contingent upon the interaction with their environment. Being neither great men nor determined products of their milieu, leaders function within broader societal configurations, institutional structures and cultures and more particular political constellations[6]. Hence, different streams in literature have argued that we are witnessing the emergence of entrepreneurial leadership in order to meet the challenges of contemporary local governance.

As we shall elaborate below, this article tries to bring together the institutional tendency towards the strong mayor model of political leadership and the shifting substance and nature of mayoral agendas and networks in localities in the wake of local governance from a comparative perspective.

The strong mayor as an institutional isomorphism?

While leadership is one of the fundamental principles found in almost any system of local government, two broad and traditional ideal-types could be identified considering the selection, position and style of leaders[7].

Traditional ideal-types of local political leadership

In the first ideal-type, leadership is relatively strong in that it dominates the council and the administration. This is regularly achieved through a dualistic conception of legislative-executive relations and individualized by vesting leadership in the office of mayor. The latter is often elected (quasi-)directly and usually leans on majoritarian principles of decision-making. This model is

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[4] Rikke Berg/Nirmala Rao (Hrsg.), Transforming Local Political Leadership, Houndmills 2005.
[5] Steve Leach/David Wilson, Local Political Leadership, Bristol 2000.
[6] Robert Elgie, Political Leadership in Liberal Democracies, Houndmills 1995.
[7] Herwig Reynaert/Kristof Steyvers/Pascal Delwit/Jean-Benoit Pilet (Hrsg.), Local Political Leadership in Europe. Town Chief, City Boss or Local President?, Brugge/Baden-Baden 2009.

traditionally identified with Southern Europe. In the second model leadership is relatively weak either by being non-local (the former model of communist Central and Eastern Europe) or non-political (city managers embody the executive and its political counterpart is merely ceremonial). Alternatively, local leadership does exist but is shared by a collective that is appointed or indirectly elected and whose powers are embedded in the legislative (monism such as in the collegiate or committee types of local government) nurturing a consensus oriented style of decision-making. Here, leaders are primus-inter-pares and the model is traditionally associated with the North of Europe.

Since the 1990s, Europe has witnessed a tendency to break away from some of these traditions especially when it comes to the more collective and consensual forms of leadership. Seeking enhanced accountable, executive and strategic leaders has favoured the strong mayoral model over some of its institutional alternatives[8]. While reasons, reactions and success might be varied for different contexts, a number of underlying tendencies can be identified that will be outlined below.

Why traditional types are under pressure

Many transformations in contemporary local government are seen in the light of the alleged shift towards local governance. The latter stems from broader economical and cultural shifts. These boil down to the political organization of the localities and have a clear effect on its leadership. When economies internationalize, competition intensifies and localities need to tailor their policies hereinto. Hence, a new localism emerges where governmental actors adopt an entrepreneurial and developmental outlook building alliances with the private sector while at the same time facing the challenges of fiscal austerity and redistribution. Culturally, post materialism erodes the bedrock of the classic linkages to politics such as (the party oriented) representative participation and calls for issue oriented, empowered stakeholder involvement. Simultaneously, policies develop in a more Europeanised and/or regional framework or do no longer fit the departmental chutes of bureaucracy.

As a result, institutions multiply and restructure while new networks and policy initiatives emerge and gain importance. The new governance includes many levels and actors. Hence, decision-making becomes more networked: it depends on key-individuals located in different organizations and levels instead of hierarchic command from local government. As governmental power transforms, so does its role towards the enabling and integrating. These shifts are not unproblematic though as they tend to evoke dilemmas of coordination and accountability. As the English political scientist Peter John has noted the complexity, fragmentation and networked nature of governance puts particular strains on

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[8] Olivier Borraz/Peter John, The Transformation of Urban Political Leadership in Western Europe, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 28(1) (2004), S. 107-120.

leadership: '…elites and masses demand leaders who can pull the shifting framework of local decision-making together, act as entrepreneurs in the highly competitive environment and be the people whom the public can identify with…'[9]. Strengthening the executive, particularly in institutional terms is often the main response to this challenge.

How the strong mayor is a response to this pressure

This aim has been tried to realize by using two, often interconnected, institutional strategies that refer to the dilemmas of accountability and coordination stemming from the new modes of governance. The first one embraces the personalisation of leadership selection; the second one the concentration of executive powers in the hands of individualised leadership. Though not exclusively, these tendencies seem to condensate in the office of mayor.

The direct election of mayors is the highlighted example of the first tendency. While some countries could draw on the experience from previous decades, directly elected mayors were introduced or generalised from the 1990s onwards in a variety of countries such as Germany, Italy, Poland, Hungary and England and discussed in many more. Neither timing nor context were at random as it comes to the underlying rationale for this institutional reform[10]. During this period, democracy was diagnosed deficient, indicated by lowering turnout in elections and decreasing degrees of trust in government. The alleged crisis of legitimacy – as deduced by key-actors in decision-making – should be cured with the local level as a laboratory and in a particular direction. Hence, establishing a personal and direct link between the citizenry and its leadership was seen as leverage to re-establish legitimacy. Giving mayors a direct mandate would not only make them more visible but should consequently provide a leeway to enhanced accountability. Mayors would act as figureheads symbolizing the nucleus of government, clarifying the complexities of governance and revitalizing local democracy. This logic also implied a form of dissatisfaction with the way things were traditionally done, i.e. appointing or indirectly electing mayors. Especially in the latter case the reform entailed a breaking away from the representative underpinnings of local government and particularly thrived on an anti-party sentiment[11].

Despite a tendency towards direct election, approximately half of all European countries still opts to allocate the primal leadership position alternatively. For one thing, the Nordic countries largely seem

[9] Peter John, Local Governance in Western Europe, London 2001. Citation on S. 16-17.
[10] Helge Larsen, Transforming Local Leadership: Models, Trends and Reforms, in: Rikke Berg/Nirmala Rao (Hrsg.), Transforming Local Political Leadership, Houndmills 2005, S. 195-211.
[11] Hellmutt Wollmann, The Ascent of the Directly Elected Mayor in European Local Government in West and East, in: Herwig Reynaert/Kristof Steyvers/Pascal Delwit/Jean-Benoit Pilet (Hrsg.), Local Political Leadership in Europe. Town Chief, City Boss or Local President?, Brugge/Baden-Baden 2009, S. 365-396.

to stick to more indirect forms of leadership nomination[12]. Also, being part of a larger shift to personalising the electoral system the direct election of mayors has softer counterparts: e.g. when the candidate on the list that gains the majority or is part of the ruling coalition with most preferential votes is proclaimed mayor (e.g. France and Spain). Additionally and despite reformist action, the mere existence of the legal possibility for direct election isn't always particularly put into practice. In England for instance, only a few local authorities embraced the directly elected mayor while the bulk opted for the leader-cabinet model that from a comparative perspective involves a more modest shift from the committee to the collegiate form of collectivism (although in a more dualistic mode)[13].

The second tendency appeals to new demands in terms of coordination. Counterbalancing the paralyzing pluralism of governance, ideas emerge to endow executive leadership with the capacities to integrate action and to provide direction. Once again, mayors are often the actors in which hopes are vested. To that end different means might serve which share the intention to provide mayors with the tools to become a political broker, i.e. the artful synthesizer of interest mediation and coalition management. On the one hand mayors might be given a degree of influence over the appointment of the executive, reflecting cabinet-like spoil systems or a say in deciding on the chief administrator of the municipality. On the other hand, mayors can achieve actual executive decision-making power. This is often attempted by establishing a clearer separation between the legislative and the executive branches of government while at the same time executive powers (including those functionally decentralised by higher levels of government) are concentrated in the hands of the mayor who acts as the individual CEO of the municipality[14]. Such a concentration implies a de-collectivization of local leadership.

When electoral and functional strengthening meet, local leadership obviously tends towards the ideal-type of the strong mayor. Leadership might then turn to more presidential instead of first-among-equal. Yet, stronger executive leadership might be sought for without these coinciding. As the case of the Netherlands shows, separating the executive from the legislative (the so-called *dualisering*) neither implies individualization of the executive nor providing direct electoral linkage through the mayoralty[15]. As mentioned, many English localities point at similar conclusions and their Nordic counterparts tend to stick to the more collective modes of decision-making. In this respect, it

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[12] Michael Goldsmith/Helge Larsen, Local Political Leadership: Nordic Style, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 28(1) (2004), S. 121-133.

[13] Colin Copus, Leading the Localities. Executive Mayors in English Local Governance, Manchester 2006.

[14] Helge Larsen (Anm. 10).

[15] Bas Denters/Pieter-Jan Klok/Henk Van der Kolk, The Reform of the Political Executive in Dutch Local Government, in Rikke Berg/Nirmala Rao (Hrsg.), Transforming Local Political Leadership, Houndmills 2005, S. 15-28.

should be noted that several comparative assessments indicate that the functional underpinnings of direct legitimacy are rather exception than rule in Europe[16]. Many institutional varieties thus still coincide in Europe where several instruments serve the similar end of making leaders stronger, a tendency that now appears also in many countries with a more collective tradition. Reform is thus in many cases path-dependent.

The entrepreneurial visionary mayor as a behavioural isomorphism?

The above has focused on the institutional strengthening of the executive. Similarly and related, other transformations have been ongoing as well. These refer to the substance and modes of local political leadership, scrutinizing how leaders actually behave once they are in any given institutional type of office. In particular, it has been argued that the balance of the different tasks that leaders assume is altering. Leaders have traditionally be identified with the tasks to set the agenda in developing strategic and policy direction, to build and maintain internal and external networks and to be concerned with the accomplishment of policy[17]. Also, the way in which these tasks are actually put into practice transform, bringing us to the aspect of leadership style. Traditionally, several types of styles have been identified with visionary leaders (proactive front figures with an empowering outlook) usually contrasted with caretakers (reactive group spokesmen with an overpowering outlook)[18].

The rise of mayoral entrepreneurialism?

With the emergence of governance, also the nature and priority balance of key-tasks for local leaders is said to alter. The growing complexity and fragmentation of local decision-making call not only for more but also for a particular kind of local leadership. This tends to concentrate on its role in agenda-setting and network broking giving way to an entrepreneurial kind of mayoral leadership.

These entrepreneurs tend to be creative in favouring innovative and divergent approaches to problems of collective action in which their main outlook is the search for opportunities for local development. Entrepreneurs are also integrative in promoting aggregation and identity around a common framework for the locality. Entrepreneurs thus create vision, i.e. an innovative representation of problems and solutions where others can link to collectively and purposefully and

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[16] Elodie Guérin/Eric Kerrouche, From Amateurs to Professionals: The Changing Face of Local Elected Representatives in Europe, in: Local Government Studies, 34(2) (2008), S. 179-201.

[17] Steve Leach/David Wilson (Anm. 5).

[18] Empowering refers to the integrative capacity of these leaders. By bringing together various actors around a common purpose they get things done. Overpowering means authority based on strictly confined formal hierarchy. Peter John/Alistair Cole, Political Leadership in the New Urban Governance: Britain and France Compared, in: Local Government Studies, 25(4) (1999), S. 98-115.

which subsequently allows the mobilisation of voters (and parties) and cooperation of other actors in relevant networks[19].

Entrepreneurial vision: between economic development and redistribution?

One influential line of thinking has argued that the context favouring the emergence of entrepreneurialism also bears on the substance of the associated vision. In particular the political agenda is said to be squeezed to issues of economic growth in which public decision-makers are primarily occupied with finding ways to optimize the position of their locality in an environment of growing competition between local spaces. The globalised version of late capitalism thereby tends to confine the scope of political action to privatization, deregulation and a number of characteristic supply-side measures (reducing taxes and slimming down administration, investing in infrastructure and providing market-tailored education) that serve as the proverbial superstructure of a local growth machine[20]. This convergence has commonly been associated with (and criticised in) the analysis of urban politics in North-America. Although some comparative accounts have argued a similar turn towards economic development as one of the primal local policy perspectives in contemporary Europe, others tend to be more moderate in assessing the leadership agenda univocally in this direction.

Whilst some have identified the emergence of organized opposition to a narrow focus on economic development under the form of anti-growth movements, other have more positively extended political agendas to rather progressive versions. These essentially aim at redistribution with the improvement of welfare services, public education and housing. Such an agenda tends to be associated with (European) political systems in which parties, organized civil society and the upper levels of state have a relatively greater bearing on the scope of action of local government[21].

In practice, these perspectives are the endpoints of a continuum between development and redistribution and in many localities on the mayoral agenda a trade-off occurs. Comparative analysis in a European context e.g. shows that the bulk of mayors do consider attracting economic activities among their core-tasks but '…apart from the dominant concern with economic development the agendas put forward […] do not display great homogeneity'. The developmental outlook is combined with other priorities leading to ideal-typically contrasting visions for the city with mayors

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[19] Annick Magnier, Strong Mayors? On Direct Election and Political Entrepreneurship, in Henry Bäck/Hubert Heinelt/Annick Magnier (Hrsg.), The European Mayor. Political Leaders in the Changing Context of Local Democracy, Wiesbaden 2006, S. 353-376.
[20] David Harvey, From Managerialism to Entrepreneuralism. The Transformation of Urban Governance in Late Capitalism, in: Geografiska Annaler, 71 (1989), S. 253-268.
[21] Antonia Ramírez Pérez/Clement Navarro Yáñez/Terry Clark, Mayors and Local Governing Coalitions in Democratic Countries: A Cross-National Comparison. in: Local Government Studies, 34(2) (2008), S. 147-178.

characterized as care-takers (focused on service provision and quality maintenance of municipal action), deprivation-removers (solving structural problems in the fields of redistribution and amenities) or being pro-growth (combining substantial development with more symbolic elements of urban marketing)[22].

Entrepreneurial brokerage: between network nodes and fragmented arenas?

Next to the embedding of their agenda-setting role in a visionary direction, the second core task of mayors in building and maintaining networks is said to be under transformation as well. Whereas the internal aspects of ensuring cohesiveness in parties and majorities have become more complex in a situation of increasing volatility and fragmentation of the European local party system[23], mayors also have to cover and to concentrate on a more variegated form of external networking. As an essential feature of governance, decision-making power has namely been dispersed so command and control from the ivory leadership tower have given in to the capacity to establish, mobilize and focus the fragmented actors in a network in the purposive direction of the visionary agenda. Mayoral leadership thus tends to become associated with the skills of brokerage.

On the one hand leaders have to engage in complex vertical power relations sharing governmental space in policy-making with a variety of special purpose bodies, regions, central governments and the EU. In ensuring the interests of their localities, mayors thereby only dispose of some of the pieces of the puzzle of policy entanglement. On the other hand, leaders operate in networks that challenge the traditional notions of community involvement and service delivery constituting governmental activity. Evidence suggests that (at least some and usually influential) citizens tend to engage in more narrow, ad-hoc and issue-specific forms of involvement pending between consultation and co-decision that are not always easily compatible with the strengthened leadership[24]. Most European local governments have also given up the monopoly on producing and distributing public services to the advantage of autonomous agencies, public-private partnerships or contracting-out only at arm's length of leadership control[25].

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[22] Annick Magnier/Clemente Navarro Yáñez/Pippo Russo, Urban Systems as Growth Machines. Mayor's Governing Networks against Global Indeterminancy, in: Henry Bäck/Hubert Heinelt/ Annick Magnier (Hrsg.), The European Mayor. Political Leaders in the Changing Context of Local Democracy, Wiesbaden 2006, S. 201-219.

[23] Franz Fallend/Gyorgyi Ignits/Pawel Swianiewicz, Divided Loyalties? Mayors between Party Representation and Local Community Interests, in: Henry Bäck/Hubert Heinelt/ Annick Magnier (Hrsg.), The European Mayor. Political Leaders in the Changing Context of Local Democracy, Wiesbaden 2006, S. 245-270.

[24] Pascal Delwit/Jean-Benoit Pilet/Herwig Reynaert/Kristof Steyvers (Hrsg.), Towards DIY-Politics? Participatory and Direct Democracy at the Local Level in Europe, Brugge/Baden-Baden 2007.

[25] Tom Christensen, Administrative Reform: Changing Leadership Roles?, in: Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration, 14(4) (2001), S. 457-480.

When agenda-setting meets networks governing coalitions can be formed as often informal, stable, interdependent exchanges occur between public and private actors that foster policy-making and implementation and wherein governmental actors – especially mayoral leaders – play a pivotal role. These coalitions can under certain circumstances develop to regimes which brings us to the question of dominance of business interests and actors in them. In line with the pro-growth reasoning, it has often been argued that business actors dispose of systemic power mayoral leaders are dependent upon to successfully establish their developmental agenda. This dependency entails openness to business claims reflected in deep and intense interactions between mayors and the business community forming the node of the external leadership network[26].

Yet comparative accounts – particularly in a European context – have determined that contacts with the business community are embedded in a broader civic arena in which a trade-off with alternate local associations and groups may occur. This arena is often complemented by an electoral and intergovernmental counterpart. To the extent that the mayoral agenda deviates from the narrow pro-growth perspective, alternative arenas tend to gain influence in the mayoral network[27].

Entrepreneurs do not implement?

The concentration on strategy and networking in governance tends to decrease the importance of the third core task of local political leaders: the implementation of policy. To that, the emergence of managerial reforms witnessed in European local government (often termed New Public Management) seems to contribute. Next to breaking the classic bureaucratic hierarchy (by further opening up local service delivery to non-state actors) redesigning the relationship between politicians and administrators is attempted. While proclaiming decentralisation and a clearer separation of roles and despite its variance and seemingly incoherence one of the actual consequences of the new politico-administrative network could be the strengthening of the policy-making role of the professionalised top administrators. Although more thorough accounts are lacking as to how the discourse of managerial autonomy has effectively empowered the administration, it is clear that the redefinition of its relationship with politics provides a challenge to the classic implementation role of leadership[28].

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[26] Clarence Stone, Looking Back to Look Forward: Reflections on Urban Regime Analysis, in: Urban Affairs Review, 40(3) (2005), S. 309-341.

[27] Clemente Navarro Yáñez/Annick Magnier/Antonia Ramírez Perez, Local Governance as Government-Business Cooperation in Western Democracies, in: International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 32(3) (2008), S. 531-547.

[28] Christopher Hood/Guy Peters, The Middle Aging of New Public Management: Into the Age of Paradox?, in: Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 14(3) (2004), S. 267-282; Anne-Mette Kjaer, Governance

The rise of the visionary mayor?

These developments do not leave leadership style unaffected either. It is argued that leadership in governance is proactive, competent, programmatic, negotiating and truly political (beyond the managerial) in its predispositions. It seeks to be a vector in generating support from local actors and taking the lead in partnerships. As such, it tends towards the style of the visionary who is proactive and empowering. This style does not automatically entail a more personal or individual one however, as network integration is fundamental for effective policy-making. Instead, the capacity of leaders to foster (and probably even better to steer) collective modes of decision-making is crucial[29].

In conclusion: path-dependent transformations in local political leadership

This article has brought together a number of transformations that are ongoing in the field of local political leadership in Europe. In particular, it has identified a tendency towards the institutional model of the strong (who is directly elected and embodies the executive functions in local government) and entrepreneurial visionary (who has the capacity to integrate various actors around a shared vision) mayor. Whilst these tendencies refer to an underlying rationale to strengthen local leadership in the wake of the challenges provided by local governance, the picture is more diversified than some of the highlighted examples may evoke. In many European polities and to a different extent collectivism in local leadership and seeking the balance between various agendas and arenas still prevail. It refers to a path-dependent trajectory of reform and transformation, exemplifying the unique variety that keeps characterizing a more integrated Europe.

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and the Urban Bureaucracy, in: Jonathan Davies/David Imbroscio (Hrsg.), Theories of Urban Politics, London 2009, S. 137-152.

[29] It is not unthinkable that the latter might create a paradox for the institutionally strengthened leadership (particularly of the personified electoral kind) and in time of failure might rather lead to a consensual facilitator style of leadership. Panagiotis Getimis/Despondina Grigoriadou, Changes in Urban Political Leadership: Leadership Types and Styles in the Era of Urban Governance, in: Michael Haus/Hubert Heinelt/Murray Stewart (Hrsg.), Urban Governance and Democracy. Leadership and Community Involvement, Oxon 2005, S. 168-189.