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Subnational Policymaking in an Era of Political Instability: Developing a New Typology for Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT *Political parties and their representatives play a crucial role in policymaking processes. However, increasing electoral volatility and unpredictability in democracies across Europe and beyond have disrupted the once relative stability of both national and subnational politics. This article offers fresh insights into the potential impacts of these transformations on subnational policies within multilevel systems. It challenges the prevailing “stability bias” in existing literature. Through an examination of the links between electoral instability and central–regional interactions, a new typology is developed to facilitate comparative analyses of territorial policy dynamics and their outcomes.*

Keywords: political instability; volatility; subnational policymaking; territorial politics; multilevel governance; comparative public policy

Introduction

In a democratic system, the link between politics and public policy is defined by the way elections determine the composition of representative bodies and the orientation of governments. These in turn have the power and responsibility to make and implement policy decisions. In a context of electoral stability, the profile of the main political decision-makers is fairly predictable. Even when opposing camps alternate in power, it is possible to identify regular patterns of policy development, provided that the characteristics and electoral strength of the parties involved in the process do not change dramatically between elections.

In federal or regionalized/decentralized countries, horizontal competition between state-wide parties can intersect with vertical tensions between centre and periphery and lead to policies that focus not only on the redistribution of resources between social groups, but also between different geographical areas (McEwen and Moreno 2005;

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Béland and Lecours 2008; Keating 2013). This multidimensionality adds complexity to the comparative study of politics and policies. Still, predictability of interactions between relatively stable national and subnational actors can help a multilevel system reach an equilibrium and thus provide a solid framework for analysing policymaking processes.

Political instability further complicates the picture as a high turnover of political personnel and radical swings between parties can make the process leading to policy formulation more uncertain and difficult to frame. Some studies have suggested that high levels of political instability can have a significant impact on democratic processes, policy decisions – e.g. investment, environmental policy, delivery of public goods, healthcare – and the functioning of public administration (Alesina and Perotti 1996; Fredriksson and Svensson 2003; Nachmias and Arbel-Ganz 2005; Klomp and de Haan 2009; Chiamonte and Emanuele 2022). Interestingly, most of the literature on the impact of instability on public policy focuses on emerging democracies. There are very few studies on the policy effects of political instability in Western Europe.

This article aims to fill that increasingly evident gap in the literature, which does not yet seem to have fully integrated recent structural transformations in the political sphere into the comparative analysis of policymaking processes in mature democracies. In the case of multilevel systems, the situation is further aggravated by a general tendency to focus on the national sphere, neglecting the significant impact that political instability has on policy dynamics across different layers of government.

After providing an overview of the existing comparative literature on subnational politics and policy, the article introduces the topic of political instability, emphasizing the distinct territorial origins of increasing volatility in elections, representation, and government. A novel typology is developed to formulate hypothesized links between political instability and territorial policy dynamics within multilevel systems, facilitating future comparative analysis. While systematic testing of the hypothesized relationships is beyond the scope of this article, a range of empirical examples is presented to elucidate the nature of each type of policy dynamic.

From Dissimilarity to Instability

Over the past 30 years, there has been much criticism of the tendency of various studies to treat the nation-state as the almost exclusive unit of analysis for investigating important political and social phenomena, a perspective referred to as “methodological nationalism” (Jeffery 2008). To address this bias, growing attention has been paid to the subnational dimension and territorial dynamics shaping political and policymaking processes within countries. As a result, it has been stressed that the traditional “functional” left–right political divide may intersect with the “territorial” centre–periphery cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). While the centre–periphery cleavage has been employed to account for political phenomena such as regionalism, separatism, and the call for greater autonomy and representation by constituent units of a nation-state, it can also be used more broadly to depict the tensions and dynamics that arise between national and regional/local political elites in multilevel systems (Swenden and Maddens 2009; Thorlakson 2020).

Scholars have emphasized that the degree of territorial integration within a political system plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between

subnational and national policymakers (Thorlakson 2020). Similarity or dissimilarity between subnational and national political elites in their party affiliations and ideological/programmatic orientations can have a significant impact on policies in multilevel systems (Schakel 2013; Vampa 2016; Kleider 2018). In cases where political systems are loosely territorially integrated, even when the same state-wide parties control both national and regional governments, they may be internally divided and vertically disconnected, which can still lead to policy divergence (Hepburn 2010).

However, while emphasizing the existence of dissimilarities between different levels of government, the literature outlined above still tends to adopt a rather static approach to the study of territorial party politics and resulting policies. This approach is rooted in the assumption that even when territorial tensions emerge, they occur within highly resilient party systems in which structural change is minimal, as evidenced by their general stability in the second half of the twentieth century (Bartolini and Mair 1990). Within this predictable framework, it is relatively easy to identify and study the interactions between subnational and national policymakers. Yet this view may not always be valid, especially in a more fluid and unstable political scenario.

Recent evidence suggests that national party systems in Western Europe are undergoing a process of de-institutionalization, characterized by significant vote swings between existing parties, the rise of new parties, and the collapse of established ones (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2022). This transformation extends to the regional/subnational level.

It has been shown that in the 15 years following the financial crisis, the average volatility in the elections of 58 European regions has increased by almost one-third compared to the previous 15 years, rising from less than 20 per cent to over 26 per cent (Vampa 2023). This means that, in recent years, on average, a quarter of the total distribution of votes has changed after each regional election. This is even higher than in national elections, where average volatility since the 1990s has increased from below 10 per cent to almost 20 per cent (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2017). Regions have generally become arenas of political change. Scantamburlo et al. (2018, p. 615) have analysed the emergence of new challengers in regional elections in Italy and Spain and have stressed that “the transformation of political spaces in the aftermath of the Great Recession is happening as much at the regional as at the national level”.

Therefore, in light of this increasing unpredictability, there is a growing urgency to develop a framework for analysing subnational policies that takes into account how instability affects different levels of government and their interactions. To accomplish this goal, the next section develops a clear definition of political instability and its territorial components. This conceptual groundwork will facilitate the development of a theoretical model that establishes connections between stability/instability and territorial policy dynamics.

Political Instability, Territorial Politics, and Policy Dynamics

In defining instability and its territorial components, this article focuses on the regional level, which is here defined as the set of institutions located between central and local government (Keating 2013). In many decentralized and federal countries, regions act as

focal points where territorial tensions converge: state-wide parties often compete with region-specific parties and national political competition intersects with centre–periphery dynamics. This coexistence of state-wide and region-specific factors shaping regional politics is also likely to affect manifestations of political stability or instability and, ultimately, policy outputs and outcomes.

A core component of political instability is volatility (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2022), which can be operationalized as the aggregate change in the share of votes, seats and government positions won by political parties from one election to the next. To better understand political instability in the regional arena, where opposite territorial pressures may coexist, it is important to consider whether volatility is mainly determined by fluctuations of parties operating within a single region or by shifts between parties competing in several regions/across the whole country. For this reason, volatility can be disaggregated into two territorial components, based on the recent classification presented by Vampa (2023), which in turn is inspired by prior work by Bolgherini et al. (2021). This classification distinguishes between “region-specific volatility”, which refers to changes between political parties that are active exclusively in one region, and “region-transcending volatility”, which is calculated for parties that are electorally active in several or all regions of a country, have state-wide organizations, or, at the very least, are part of institutionalized interregional networks (see Vampa 2023 for more details).

By combining the two types of volatility, we end up with four different scenarios, as shown in Table 1. If small changes are observable in both region-specific and region-transcending camps, we have a stable regional party system (A). Most of the literature on regional politics and public policy refers to this scenario. The focus is often on whether a regional political system is dominated by a stable set of region-specific parties (regionalized system) or region-transcending (state-wide) parties (nationalized system) or a combination of both (mixed system).

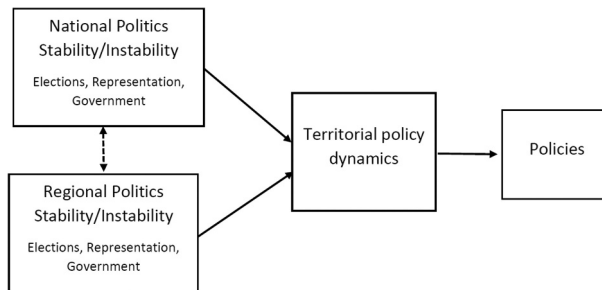
Alternatively, we might observe a highly volatile political landscape, in which change is mainly determined by shifts between region-transcending parties. This is scenario B – nationally driven instability. We have the opposite scenario when significant shifts mainly occur between region-specific parties (C, regionally driven instability). Finally, we could have a situation in which many votes simultaneously shift between region-

Table 1. Scenarios of stability and instability in regional politics

	Region-specific volatility		
	Low	High	
Region-transcending volatility	High	Nationally driven instability (B)	Multilevel instability (D)
	Low	Stability (regionalized, nationalized, mixed) (A)	Regionally driven instability (C)

Source: Adapted from Vampa (2023).

Figure 1. Subnational policies shaped by territorial policy dynamics resulting from stable/unstable politics at national and regional levels



specific and region-transcending parties, in which case we can speak of “multilevel” instability (D).

The argument presented here is that that the stability/instability observed in the regional arena affects territorial policy dynamics in combination with the stability/instability of national politics, as outlined in Figure 1. Indeed, it should be stressed that territorial policy dynamics result from the interactions between key regional and national policymakers. Weaver (2020, p. 158) defines policy dynamics in federal systems as “durable constellations of political actors and causal mechanisms that have distinctive policy consequences over time”. The concept of territorial policy dynamics is linked to, but distinct from, intergovernmental relations (IGR) as defined in the literature – see, for instance, the framework by Adam and Hepburn (2019). The latter can be regarded as the most visible manifestation of territorial policy dynamics, as IGR involves formal and informal interactions between regional and national executives and their leaderships. However, regional/national executives and leaders are, in turn, influenced by wider constellations of actors – including more or less stable parties – a phenomenon better captured by Weaver’s definition of “policy dynamics”.

Thus policies in multilevel systems are shaped by policy dynamics resulting from the interaction of national and subnational politics (Figure 1). Weaver’s general definition is not only valid for federations but may be extended to regionalized, multilevel systems. Moreover, Weaver’s use of the term “durable” could benefit from further examination, as it appears to be influenced by the stability bias that permeates much of the literature on subnational policymaking. In contrast, this article suggests that territorial policy dynamics may incorporate significant elements of unpredictability or change.

How does instability of regional and national politics affect territorial policy dynamics? The vertical axis of Table 2 incorporates the regional stability/instability scenarios presented in Table 1. These scenarios are combined with the stability/instability of the national political landscape (horizontal axis), which is predominantly composed of state-wide parties. The intersection between the two axes results in a comprehensive framework, and the table should be read as a set of hypotheses linking political instability at different levels to expected territorial policy dynamics. Further elucidation of these hypothesized links is provided in the following subsections. While systematic testing of

Table 2. Territorial policy dynamics resulting from the intersection between (stable/unstable) regional and national politics

		National stability	National instability
Regional instability	Nationally driven		4. <i>Contagion</i>
	Regionally driven	7. <i>Centralization</i>	5. <i>Polarization</i>
	Multilevel		6. <i>Evaporation</i>
Regional stability	Nationalized	1. <i>Integration</i>	
	Regionalized	2. <i>Competition</i>	8. <i>Fragmentation</i>
	Mixed	3. <i>Cooperation</i>	

the hypotheses exceeds the scope of this article, the section titled “Identifying Policy Dynamics” includes some examples and establishes the groundwork for future empirical research in this area.

The first three policy dynamics that we consider are those extensively discussed by the literature on multilevel politics and public policy. They emerge from “durable” sets of interactions between relatively stable national and regional actors and differ based on how dominant region-specific actors are in subnational policymaking.

1. *Integration*

Integration (category 1 in Table 2) is the least “dynamic” of our policy dynamics. When both regional and national party systems are dominated by stable state-wide parties, policymaking processes promote coherence in practices, policies, and regulations (Thorlakson 2009; Bolleyer 2011) and pursue a “complexity reducing approach, whereby distinctions and variance are aggregated to achieve uniformity and greater homogeneity” (Toubiana et al. 2017). This mainly (but not always) occurs in a downward direction, from centre to regions, given the primacy of state-wide parties in both arenas. Subnational and national spheres remain aligned or converge over time, particularly in areas such as administrative structures and governance practices. This can be facilitated by national government’s funding incentives or requirements, legal and regulatory frameworks, and, ultimately, the influence of state-wide players acting as stable connectors between the two levels.

2. *Competition*

The existence of a stable regionalized party system at the subnational level and a stable national party system may give rise to competitive dynamics between regional and national governments. Competition entails some divergence in the key policy priorities and goals of the two levels and attempts on each side to maximize its own authority and resources and limit the influence of the other (Börzel 2002; Thorlakson 2009). Yet this tension is rooted in a “dissimilarity equilibrium”: the regional and national political classes are different (mostly due to the existence of strong regionalist parties within the ranks of the former); they compete, but they are also accustomed to each other, thanks to their stable characteristics. Their mutual familiarity is amplified by their engaging in regular exchanges, which help them focus on their respective competitive advantages. In

sum, dissimilar but stable central and regional political actors have enough room to develop distinctive, long-term strategies aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, consolidating citizens' loyalties, and improving efficiency.

3. Cooperation

A regional political system that is stable and where both region-specific and state-wide parties coexist is more likely to cooperate with an equally stable national political system. Cooperation differs from integration in that it implies a more equal status of central and regional governments and an acceptance of existing differences (Börzel 2002). Yet, unlike competition, it seeks to reconcile differences by transforming them into synergistic complementarities, rather than exploiting them as competitive advantages. The division of labour and competences to achieve shared goals and the use of similar regulatory/legislative tools to cater for different regional needs are facilitated by the existence of a regional political class that mixes the nationalizing priorities of state-wide parties and the subnational focus of region-specific actors. Neither side of the territorial divide suffers from internal competition and dramatic electoral swings. This allows for the consolidation of cooperative institutional relations.

While the three classic categories presented above assume that electoral, representational, and governmental shifts occur within the boundaries of moderate competition between established political parties, the reality of various democratic systems, especially in Europe, has become much more complex and fluid. Consequently, it is essential to consider how territorial policy dynamics evolve in multilevel systems where both national and regional politics are increasingly unstable, as in the three scenarios presented below.

4. Contagion

When instability at both regional and national levels is driven by state-wide parties, the process of gradual convergence described above in the subsection "Integration" becomes more challenging due to continuous shifts in political equilibria. National politics still dominates, but rather than being a driver of policy diffusion (aimed at reducing complexity), it becomes the cause of contagion. Here, the meanings of diffusion and contagion diverge. While the former results from planned coordination between different levels of government (and also horizontally between regions), which is facilitated by nationally driven political stability, the latter is more an "unpredictable and transformative" consequence of backlashes (Alter and Zürn 2020) and political precariousness. High national volatility opens up opportunities for new actors or new combinations of actors to promote different policies at both national and subnational levels. The contagion can also move in the opposite direction: state-wide challengers may gain positions in regional government and then use their regional strength to destabilize national government. Contagion, unlike diffusion and integration, highlights the existence of rapid shifts and swings: indeed, contagion may trigger immune responses and attempts to reverse course.

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5. *Polarization*

Despite its precarious nature and susceptibility to reversals, contagion still connects national and regional spheres: changes occurring at one level are more likely to trigger similar shifts at the other. Yet when subnational instability is mainly driven by region-specific parties – that is, by parties that focus exclusively on the regional political arena – the risk of territorial polarization increases. Indeed, region-specific parties competing in an unstable system may engage in attempts to outbid each other, promising ever growing levels of autonomy and resources for their region, and even going as far as making promises of secession. This regionally driven instability is confronted by a central government that is itself markedly unstable, making it susceptible to counter-bidding in the opposite direction, with attempts to curtail the powers and policy autonomy of the regions (Gray 2020; Vampa and Gray 2021).

6. *Evaporation*

We might even have a scenario in which the instability of regional politics combines region-specific and region-transcending elements and therefore is “multilevel”. If it also coexists with high volatility in central government this may lead to “policy evaporation”, which can be defined as “the failure to transform rhetoric into . . . any effective policy” (Dearden 2008, p. 188). In sum, when regional instability mixes different territorial dimensions and a stable central framework is also missing, policy commitments may “get subverted or dissipated” (Jayasooria 2004, p. 42), as there is no continuous political monitoring, and it is difficult to attribute responsibilities and accountability to either national or regional decision-makers.

While stability and instability may involve both regional and national levels at the same time, with variations in the territorial roots of regional stability/instability, there might also be cases (“Centralization” and “Fragmentation” below) in which regional politics is highly unstable but national politics displays high levels of persistence or vice versa.

7. *Centralization*

When a region is politically unstable but faces a stable and persistent national political elite, its authority is more likely to shift towards the centre, regardless of the territorial drivers of regional instability. Centralization, which may not necessarily occur through constitutional means (Lecours 2017), becomes the dominant policy dynamic in such cases. Limited exposure to drastic political changes and moderate levels of competition provide the central government with a “continuity advantage” in decision-making processes over the regional government.

8. *Fragmentation*

When a regionally stable party system, regardless of its composition, faces instability at the national level, authority may shift away from the centre. Regional stability can reinforce the representational legitimacy of regional politics vis-à-vis national politics, allowing regional leaders to pursue long-term policies tailored to their local communities

without too much turbulence and risk of outbidding competition. The likely result is territorial fragmentation, involving a gradual separation of constituent units of a federal or regionalized country. In this context, the political centre, unable to reach an equilibrium and provide a clear and consistent policy framework, may be “incrementally hollowed out” (Beyers and Bursens 2006, p. 1058) and may cease to play an “integrative” role (Bolleyer 2011).

Beyond Party Politics: Institutions, Policy Sectors and Functional Pressures

The framework presented above focuses on the impact of regional and national party politics on the territorial policy dynamics that ultimately shape policy outputs and outcomes at the subnational level. This focus is justified by the fact that, in democratic systems, politics is central to determining the scope and direction of legislation and regulation. However, shifts in policy dynamics may be influenced by other aspects of the institutional, economic, and social context in which policymaking processes take place. Institutions, for instance, play an important role in influencing interactions between regional and national governments (Radaelli et al. 2012). Many of Europe’s existing territorial institutions were created in a period of relative political stability and, by virtue of their path-dependence, stickiness, and feedback effects (Pierson 1993; Béland and Schlager 2019), may help contain, at least for a time, some of the pressures exerted by increasing interparty volatility.

Institutions also shape patterns of party competition in multilevel settings (Jeffery 2010) and they may in turn affect manifestations of political change. It follows that volatility (and resulting shifts in territorial policy dynamics) may also be regarded as an intervening variable between institutions and policies. At the same time, we may observe a growing gap between rigid institutional structures and increasing political fluidity that may lead to calls for reforms in the territorial organization of a country or, in the most extreme cases, to its break-up. Thus, a more extensive model should include institutions linked to party competition in a bidirectional relationship.

The institutional structure of a country also determines the perimeter of the policies that are more exposed to territorial dynamics. Thus, it is important to highlight that the framework presented in this article mainly applies to those policy areas in which regions and, more generally, “meso-level jurisdictions”, have gained more authority (Keating 2013; Hooghe and Marks 2016). The expectation is that policy areas such as healthcare, social assistance (delivery of social services), education, and economic development (Kleider 2018; Garritzmann et al. 2021; Toubeau and Vampa 2021) will be more affected by the dynamics described here than areas in which central governments still play a dominant role, such as social security, defence, and foreign policy (although, as shown below, paradiplomacy may be open to a more active role by sub-state authorities).

Finally, changes in the social and economic sphere can also add “functional pressures” on the design and type of policies adopted in multilevel systems (Vis and van Kersbergen 2013). For example, growing economic inequality between regions, increasing budgetary constraints, or significant demographic transformations may strain the relationship between national and regional governments, or contribute to the search for a new balance between them. However, these functional pressures are ultimately filtered through political representation (Vis and van Kersbergen 2013) and the emphasis that political

entrepreneurs place on new policy issues in response to (real or perceived) social transformations (De Vries and Hobolt 2020). Thus, again, changing patterns of party competition may act as an intervening variable between socio-economic changes and shifts in policy paradigms. In general, as highlighted by Jeffery (2010, p. 143), the emergence or decline of political actors competing at the regional level may have both “sociological . . . and institutional roots” and these should be considered when investigating the origins and impacts of political instability.

We have outlined the theoretical foundations for analysing policy dynamics in multi-level systems that may be subject to different forms of political instability. The next sections reflect on the methodological challenges arising from studying political instability and its policy effects. First, there is the question of how to measure instability empirically. The second challenge is to identify different territorial policy dynamics and their outcomes.

Measuring Political Instability: Quantitative Indicators and Their Limits

Political instability can encompass the three primary elements of the democratic process: elections, representation, and government (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2022). A widely used measure of instability is volatility, which can be quantified using the Pedersen index (Pedersen 1979), ranging from 0, indicating no change from one election to the next, to 100 indicating complete change (see Vampa (2023) for an example of the application of the Pedersen index to regional elections). Although the Pedersen index is commonly applied to electoral volatility, it can also be used to assess changes in the distribution of parliamentary seats and government positions among different parties between elections. This would provide a more comprehensive evaluation of the fluidity of the political landscape beyond the electoral sphere. Additionally, in the context of regional politics, distinguishing between region-specific volatility and region-transcending volatility (Table 1) would facilitate a better understanding of the territorial roots of instability in situations where regionalizing and nationalizing political pressures may coexist.

However, the Pedersen index and its derived measures do not capture the full extent of political turmoil. A party or a coalition of parties could persist in power over an extended period with minimal changes in the distribution of votes and parliamentary seats, while simultaneously experiencing significant turnover at the leadership level. Hence, instability may be demand-driven (shifts in the electorate) or supply-driven (changes in the key characteristics of parties and leaders) (Bolgherini et al. 2021). In the latter case, quantitative analysis may be complemented by a qualitative assessment of specific case studies. In this sense, qualitative analysis can be used synergistically (Lieberman 2005) with a quantitative overview of the electoral, representational, and governmental transformations occurring across a large number of national and subnational political arenas.

Identifying Territorial Policy Dynamics: Qualitative Analysis of Key Mechanisms and their Expected Outcomes

While quantitative measures, albeit imperfect, can provide an indication of the level of instability within a political system, assigning a numerical value to the territorial policy dynamics summarized in Table 2 is considerably more challenging. This certainly does

not exclude the possibility of quantifying them with a limited range of indicators in the future. However, in this article, which lays new theoretical and empirical foundations in an area that has remained relatively unexplored, it may be more fruitful to adopt a qualitative approach.

Although there is not enough space here to list the sources of evidence that can be used for qualitative analysis, it is nevertheless important to specify the criteria that allow us to empirically detect the mechanisms associated with the distinct policy dynamics and their outcomes. The following paragraphs provide an overview of such mechanisms. Some examples are also discussed. While establishing a direct causal link between instability and an alteration of policy dynamics would require in-depth analysis of specific cases, the examples hint at an evolving picture within key European countries. This cannot be fully explained by persistent institutional structures and long-term social changes (whose impact, in any case, is mediated by party politics, as suggested above).

1. Integration via Isomorphism

Isomorphism can be identified as a key mechanism for policy integration in a multilevel system, involving the alignment of policies, structures, and procedures across different levels of government and organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Bulman-Pozen 2014). This results in converging outcomes, with regional governments playing a significant role in implementing nationally agreed-upon policies and meeting shared national standards.

German integrated federalism, also supported by a stable party system until the 2000s, was characterized by processes of isomorphism affecting, for instance, women's policy infrastructures, prison policies, and local government reforms (Lodge and Weigrich 2005; Lang 2009; Wollmann 2010).

The importance of stabilization in party political dynamics for the emergence of relatively homogeneous regional institutions is particularly evident in the Italian case. Indeed, in 1945 "ordinary" regions were included in the constitution alongside five special status regions but, due to the polarizing dynamics at the onset of the Cold War, the former were not established and given significant powers until the 1970s. With the consolidation of the national party system and growing consensus-based politics (*consociativismo*), Italy finally saw a relative narrowing of territorial gaps in its multilevel institutional structure and ordinary regions were endowed with the same powers, administering a newly created National Health Service (Vampa 2016).

2. Competition via (Unilateral) Experimentation

In a competitive policy environment the prevailing mechanism is experimentation (Jha 2015), pursued unilaterally by each level of government in an attempt to gain a growing share of output legitimacy and consolidate democratic support for comprehensive reform packages. In empirical analyses, we should observe detailed and ambitious new legislation followed by comprehensive plans implemented and administered by either regional or national authorities.

In some Spanish regions, such as Catalonia and the Basque Country, the prevalence of sub-state nationalist or regionalist movements favoured the emergence of competitive

dynamics, whereby regional governments sought to experiment and promote innovative policies that departed from state-wide models, especially in the welfare sector, in order to strengthen regional distinctiveness (Vampa 2016). For instance, in 1989 the Basque Country introduced a new measure: a “minimum income of insertion”. The Spanish government immediately opposed this initiative, arguing that it would encourage social dependence and accused the Basque government of trying to destroy territorial solidarity (Noguera and Ubasart 2003). Yet, at the same time, the Socialists in central power embraced other innovations promoted in the Basque Country in the area of free health-care assistance and used them for the expansion of the Spanish National Health System established in 1986 (Gallego 2003).

3. Cooperation via Complementarity

Cooperation is evidenced by the search for complementarity between national and subnational levels of government (Schütze 2009). Policies are developed and implemented in a highly coordinated manner. Thus, one observes the creation of a stable and widely accepted national framework, which does not prevent but often encourages subnational activism in the development of additional schemes to achieve common goals or address region-specific problems. In Europe, elements of complementarity emerged in the policy area of paradiplomacy, which saw regions increasingly engaged in a range of diplomatic activities alongside national governments.

For instance, in Bavaria, the regionalist Christian Social Union was deeply integrated into national politics through its alliance with the national Christian Democrats. As a result, policy dynamics of integration (mentioned above) were accompanied by cooperation, which, among other things, influenced the way German federalism operated in the area of paradiplomacy. Bavaria has been regarded as “a well-developed German region in terms of international contacts and initiatives” (Criekemans 2010, p. 40). While its diplomatic representation is conditioned by Germany’s federal constitution, the *Land* may conclude treaties with foreign countries with the consent of the federal government in Berlin. Thus, complementarity has emerged between the *Länder* and the federal government, whereby the former conduct “external relations”, while the latter is in charge of “foreign policy” (Criekemans 2010, p. 40) – this is particularly evident in Bavaria, the only German *Land* where we observe a clear (and, until recently, stable) coexistence of region-specific and state-wide political actors.

Even in Spain, at a time when stability still encouraged forms of cooperation between regionalist and state-wide parties, the Catalan leader Jordi Pujol promoted international regional collaborations in Europe, which would “not erode, but complement the role of the states in the European Union” (Nagel 2004, p. 65). More generally, before the financial crisis that deeply transformed Spanish politics, dynamics of competition could coexist with forms of collaboration and “mutual back scratching” between stable national and regional elites (Field 2014).

4. Contagion via Spreading

In the contagion scenario, we should observe shifts in policy and the emergence of new policy paradigms at one level of government that are linked to and influenced by political

developments at the other level. When similar policy shifts occur in both regional and national arenas, they may lead to integration (“Integration via Isomorphism” above) if a new equilibrium is reached. However, if the political environment remains unstable, contagion can spread further and trigger more changes and swings in legislation and implementation of key policies. In this context, there is no scope for “positive policy diffusion” (here, “spreading” is also being used as a “negative” counterpart of diffusion) because, due to the high instability, regional leaders do not have sufficient time and opportunities to learn and adopt good practices from one another (Shipan and Volden 2021).

In Italy, the collapse of the established party system at both national and regional levels in the 1990s led to rapid changes and continuous adjustments in territorial relations. New (often inconsistent) policy paradigms at both national and regional levels quickly emerged and spread across regions: emphasis on spending discipline, promotion of public–private partnerships in service provision, and more focus on activation policies than on social assistance (Vampa 2016). Interestingly, the contagion moved both downwards and upwards. Regional branches of national parties were able to exert growing influence on national policies and push for the promotion of new reforms. These, however, remained partial or were not fully implemented due to the continuing instability and constant shifts in the national party system. Therefore a failed attempt to enact constitutional changes in 2006 was followed by a “fiscal federalism” reform in 2008–2009, which quickly transitioned back to top-down austerity measures after a swift alteration in national political equilibria (Bolgherini 2014).

More recently, in Spain, regions where the integrating action of strong national parties had previously prevailed began experiencing increasing nationally driven instability. This led to a process of “contagion”, somewhat reminiscent of what happened in Italy in the 1990s. The emergence of left-wing and right-wing populist parties at the national level transformed the political landscape, impacting many Autonomous Communities. This transformation facilitated the rapid territorial spread of new policy issues centred on democratic regeneration and opposition to economic austerity (Scantamburlo et al. 2018).

5. Polarization via Outbidding

Polarization becomes apparent when outbidding mechanisms prevail within each territorial level. A polarized case study, for example, would display region-specific unstable actors competing with each other to promote increasingly radical policies that disrupt existing territorial arrangements and push for greater autonomy and even secession. Outbidding at the national level, on the other hand, follows opposite patterns, with politicians seeking to outdo each other by promoting more centralization and tighter constraints on regional autonomy (Gray 2020).

In Spain, after the financial crisis, while some Autonomous Communities were affected by national political transformations, others witnessed processes of radical change that mainly reshaped the region-specific party camp. The case of Catalonia is emblematic in this respect. Here, a moderate autonomist bloc was pressured by civil society movements and then completely replaced by a more fluid set of groups engaged in outbidding each other by promoting increasingly radical territorial

plans. Their policy positions rapidly shifted from opposing austerity measures and the constraints of the Spanish fiscal regime to unilateral declarations of independence. Volatility skyrocketed from 3 per cent in 2006 to around 13 per cent in 2013, rising above 20 per cent in 2015–2017, and mainly affected the regionalist camp (Vampa 2023). The years 2015–2017 also coincided with the peak of the Catalan crisis, with the pro-independence referendum held in 2017. This provoked opposite centralizing responses from state-wide political groups, including new parties such as Ciudadanos and Vox, which competed in promising an ever-stricter approach to territorial issues (centralizing outbidding), resulting in polarized territorial dynamics (Gray 2020).

6. Evaporation via Blurring

Territorial dynamics of evaporation, in which policies do not consistently respond to political impulses at any level, are characterized by “blurring” mechanisms (Elias et al. 2015; Koedam 2021). In this case, policy positions and decisions are short term and lack a clear territorial allocation of responsibilities. Consequently, the absence of unambiguously centralizing or pro-autonomy initiatives is noticeable. A tendency to shift blame dominates, given the constant turnover of political actors with different territorial orientations coexisting in the same regional context and their reduced level of accountability.

In Italy, the 2010s witnessed the proliferation of region-specific political groups, often dominated by local figures with weak connections to national parties (Vampa 2021a). As a result, some regions experienced “multilevel instability”, responding simultaneously to different national and subnational pressures. This led to territorial policy dynamics becoming more vulnerable to evaporation due to lack of clear direction and blurred accountability. In this context, arbitrary decisions made by loosely connected regional leaders and short-term decisions of precarious national elites were mixed incoherently. Paradoxically, this extreme fluidity often resulted in paralysis or stagnation. For instance, the autonomist aspirations of some regions were partly accommodated by national elites, but due to the constant changes in government orientation and disagreements between (and within) regions, coherent plans were never defined (Giovannini and Vampa 2020). Responses to crises and external shocks, such as COVID-19, have seen attempts to impose a national framework alongside diverse and uncoordinated regional responses, leading to inconsistent communication and significant variability in territorial outcomes (Vampa 2021b; Schnabel et al. 2023).

7. Centralization via Intervention

Centralization processes are characterized by the growing direct intervention of the national government, which imposes constraints on subnational policies (Toubeau and Vampa 2021). In this particular case, central authorities assert a strong position due to their relative stability, which contrasts with a highly volatile regional political landscape. The policies and initiatives promoted at the central level have the potential to address the lack of clear regional leadership and may result in significant restrictions on subnational autonomy.

Northern Ireland can be regarded as an interesting case of national government's direct intervention, albeit reluctant, in unstable regional politics, which led to a process of centralization. The Northern Irish party system changed dramatically in the early 2000s, with the rise of Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). It then reached a precarious equilibrium in the late 2000s and collapsed again, resulting in a suspension of autonomy and multiple elections leading to no clear outcome. Relative to the Northern Irish paralysis, the post-Brexit situation in Westminster actually appeared less chaotic. Thus, since 2017, a process of policy recentralization took place. This resulted, for instance, in the centrally driven introduction of same-sex marriage and abortion regulations, which had been opposed and delayed by the DUP during its period in power in the devolved administration (Torrance 2022).

8. Fragmentation via (Regional) Disconnect

Territorial fragmentation refers to the gradual detachment of subnational policies from any national policy framework, which tends to thin out over time and might eventually vanish or lose significant meaning. Without clear central leadership, regional politics “will inevitably alter policy implementation” (Handley 2008, p. 128), resulting in de facto independent and distinctive regional governance systems.

Subnational policies have become increasingly disconnected in the UK since the late 2000s. After winning power in Scotland in 2007, the Scottish National Party (SNP) gradually consolidated its local dominance. Welsh politics proved to be even more stable, with Labour being continuously in government for over two decades. These processes of political stabilization were met with growing instability in UK-wide politics, which saw the first coalition government since World War II, the rise of the populist UK Independence Party, the Brexit referendum, three general elections between 2015 and 2019, and five prime ministers between 2010 and 2022. Regional stability combined with national turbulence accelerated a process of policy fragmentation, with the devolved governments of Scotland and Wales moving away from an increasingly chaotic centre of power (Elliott et al. 2021). After losing the 2014 independence referendum, the SNP kept winning elections and invested its political capital in obtaining more powers and widening the policy gap with England (Keating 2022). Brexit and COVID-19 reignited debates on pursuing an “exit” strategy in Edinburgh (McEwen and Murphy 2022). Yet relative political stability in Scotland and the (at least temporary) stabilization of Westminster politics after Liz Truss's departure as Prime Minister prevented these pressures from leading to Catalan-style territorial polarization. A similar but slower process of building “institutional separateness” from England also occurred in Wales (Needham and Hall 2022).

Conclusion

It has become increasingly evident that multilevel politics and public policy can no longer be viewed through the lens of a “stability bias”, whereby actors, coalitions, and policy preferences remain fixed or confined within highly predictable boundaries. Hence, this article has developed a new framework for the comparative analysis of territorial

policy dynamics within the context of escalating political instability. A set of hypotheses have been presented, linking different forms of territorial volatility in party competition with eight types of central–regional policymaking interactions (Table 2). While these categories serve as conceptual models, it is important to note that they are not exhaustive representations of the intricate realities inherent in the elaboration and implementation of policies that may also be characterized by significant sectoral variations. Rather, they function as “ideal types” that help to recognize patterns within empirical instances, which often exhibit “hybrid” and more complex characteristics.

The examples discussed above provide preliminary comparative insights into the impact of political instability on territorial policy dynamics in some major European countries. For instance, Italy shifted from integration to contagion and ultimately found itself more exposed to the risks of policy fragmentation and even evaporation. Spain initially operated through a combination of integration, competition, and cooperation, but after the financial crisis, it shifted towards contagion and polarization. The UK experienced increased fragmentation, although regional instability also led to recentralization in Northern Ireland.

In essence, the concepts, hypotheses, and methodological aspects discussed here constitute the first step in a broader debate about the territorial policy implications of political turmoil that, given the persistent challenges confronting modern societies, is likely to continue and evolve in the years to come.

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