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### 📁 Special Papers

An international comparative study on the local politics.....Hellmut Wollmann 2

Books..... 24

Papers..... 26

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### An international comparative study on the local politics

In taking up the issue of local politics the article shall focus on and single out three institutional dimensions on which the viability and vitality of local politics crucially hinge.

First, decentralization. The position of local government in a country's multi-level governmental system essentially depends on whether and to which degree relevant powers, competences and responsibilities are transferred from the upper levels to the lower (local government) levels.

Second, local territoriality. The size of the local territory essentially influences the democratic and operational base and potential of local politics.

Third, democratization. The democratic quality of local politics essentially hinges on the choice of institutions, rules and procedures of representative and/or direct democracy and of the forms of politico-administrative leadership in local government.

..... Continued on p.2.

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# **An international comparative study on the local politics<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Scope and focus**

### **Crucial institutional conditions of local politics**

In taking up the issue of local politics the article shall focus on and single out three institutional dimensions on which the viability and vitality of local politics crucially hinge.

First, decentralization. The position of local government in a country's multi-level governmental system essentially depends on whether and to which degree relevant powers, competences and responsibilities are transferred ('decentralized') from the upper levels to the lower (local government) levels.

Second, local territoriality. The size ('scale') of the local territory essentially influences the democratic and operational base and potential of local politics.

Third, democratization. The democratic quality of local politics essentially hinges on the choice of institutions, rules and procedures of representative and/or direct democracy and of the forms of politico-administrative leadership in local government.

### **Local politics in a "global perspective"**

In line with the 'global perspective' of this Handbook the article aspires to attain abroad (world-wide) country coverage. In doing so it will address, in a much-used dichotomous classification, 'developed' as well as 'developing' countries or, in another dichotomous parlance, 'Global North' as well as 'Global South' countries. However, in the following preference will be given to identifying and grouping the countries by their geographical allocation to continents and 'global regions', largely in

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line with ‘mapping by continents’ that has plausibly been used in the Global Reports initiated, composed and published by United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (see UCLG 2008).

### **Conceptual scheme of analysis**

In aiming at identifying the factors and events that have influenced the course of decentralization, territoriality and democratization in the respective countries two sets of factors should be highlighted at the outset.

For one, emblematic of the ‘developed’ versus ‘developed’ country dichotomy the countries differ greatly as to whether local level decentralization and democratization has since long been, to a larger or lesser degree, part and parcel of the country’s history and fabric (which applies particularly to North American and European countries) or whether local level decentralization and democratization has only relatively recently been ushered in as crucial elements of the country’s political transformation been (such as in Asia-Pacific and African countries at the end of colonial rule, in Latin American countries after the termination of military rule and Central Eastern European countries following the collapse of communist regime). These differences in their historical ‘starting conditions’ and political contexts should be given particular attention in the analysis of the respective countries.

Second, the socio-economic, politico-cultural, ethnic and other discrepancies and differences which not only between the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries and also within these country groups need to be given prime attention as driving factors and forces that entail varied trajectories of local level decentralization and democratization. At this point it should suffice, by using the GDP per capita as indicator, to highlight the glaring socio-economic disparity which gapes between the USA with 59.530\$ and the (EU) European countries with 33.715 \$, on the one side, and Latin American /Caribbean countries with 8.313 \$, Asia Pacific countries 7.127 \$ and Sub-Saharan African countries with 1.552 \$, on the other. But great differences yawn within these global regions as well, for instance between India with 1.939 \$ as compared to the entire Asia Pacific region with 7.127 \$ or the Sub-Saharan African countries with 1.552 \$ versus South Africa with 6.160 \$.

### **Towards a comparative analysis?**

The intended global outreach of this account could, at first sight, suggest to do this article as a methodologically sophisticated piece of comparative analysis, perhaps even along the “most similar” or “most different cases” research design (see Pzeworski and Teune 1970, Lijphart 1975). However, at a closer look, the multifarious multitude of (methodologically speaking: both dependent and independent) variables such globally far-reaching investigation is bound to come to grips with virtually rules out the possibility to embark upon such methodologically demanding and rigorous analysis, let alone the lack of time and of resources.

Yet a methodologically less elaborate and, as it were, softer comparative

approach appears worth being attempted. Instead of treating the three proposed institutional dimensions in a country by country manner in the following each of the three institutional dimensions will be addressed in a separate chapter in an across country comparative manner. Dealing with these three dimensions in separate chapters might allow to narrow down the range of relevant variables to a “researchable” size and thus to enhance the analytical potential of identifying the (causal) relation between, say, the rate of decentralization or the profile of local autonomy), on the one side, and the influencing factors (say, the specific historical etc. ‘starting conditions’, for instance, at the end colonial, military etc. rule), on the other. Such methodologically ‘softer’ approach promises to arrive (in alluding to the distinction between ‘comparative’ and ‘comparable’ research aptly proposed by Derlien 1992) at ‘comparable’ results and insights, even if (methodologically rigorous) ‘comparative’ analyses appear to be not feasible.

At last a cautioning caveat needs to be voiced. In view of the great number of countries ‘around the globe’ (amounting, in the official counting of the UN, to 195!) and of the ensuing multitude of local government systems, the following attempt at venturing a global perspective cannot help being selective, fragmentary and ‘broad brush’.

## **2. Decentralization**

In addressing decentralization this chapter deals with the transfer of powers, competences, responsibilities etc., in multi-level government systems, to subnational government levels, with a focus on the (lower tier) local government level (municipalities etc.), its autonomy and competences.

Most European countries, being unitary States, are made up of three government levels, that is central government, the regional/meso and the local government levels, the latter often having a two-tier structure (for instance county and municipality). In federal countries the meso level has a federal status in its own right (i.e. *Länder* in Germany and cantons in Switzerland as well as the ‘*comunidades autónomas*’ and ‘*regioni*’ in Spain respectively Italy as ‘quasi-federal’ countries) (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p. 146 et seq).

The legal regulation of local government lies with the central government level or (in federal countries) with the regions (*Länder*, cantons). Since the 1980s in EU member States the supra-national level has come in addition to the existing multi-level structure of the member states with its norm-setting and financial funding influencing (‘Europeanizing’) the local level as well (see Guderjan 2019, 396).

Traditionally in Continental European countries local government has been provided, often constitutionally, with a ‘general competence’ which is at the core of the typical “multi-function” model of local government (see Wollmann 2004a). In the European Charter of Local Self-Government that was adopted by the European

Council in 1985 and subsequently ratified by all European governments the common understanding of the ‘general competence’ has been reiterated and confirmed in formulating that the local authorities “the right and ability, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population”. By contrast, in the UK historically the ultra-vires doctrine reigned under which the local authorities could carry out only those functions assigned to them by Parliament. However, in 2000 legislation has granted the local authorities a so-called ‘well-being power’ (“to promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area”) which now comes close to a general competence clause (see Wilson/Game 2011, 169).

During the 1960 and 1970s in some (‘North European’) European countries, in particular in the U.K., Sweden and Germany, the political and functional role of the local authorities was significantly strengthened as along with the post-war expansion of the national welfare that climaxed the 1970s the implementation of public policy tasks was increasingly transferred (decentralized) to the local authorities. Typically, the decentralization of tasks went hand in hand with (in part massive) local level territorial reforms that were meant to enhance the capacity of the local authorities to cope with these tasks (see below section3). As a result, Sweden, being a unitary state, stands out as an exceptionally decentralized country marked by the politically, functionally and financially strongest local authorities in Europe. Exemplifying Sweden’s peculiar ‘local Welfare State’ local level personnel amounts to 83 percent of the total of public sector employees with the lion’s share (70 percent) of local government spending paid from local taxes (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p. 102 et seq.).

During the 1980s and 1990s some (‘South European’) countries embarked upon decentralizing their hitherto (‘Napoleonic’) centralist states. In 1982 France adopted a major decentralization act (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, 164 et seq.) and in the early 1990s Italy followed suit (ibid., p.169 et seq.). In both cases the decentralization measures implied a significant political and functional upgrading of the regional levels (départements and regioni respectively) and, albeit to lesser degree, some political and functional strengthening of the local government levels (communes and comuni respectively) as well.

In CEE countries, after 1989/1990, following the collapse of the communist regimes, the previous centralist Communist/Socialist State was dismantled and ‘transformed’ by rampant decentralization and the introduction of local self-government (for country reports see Baldersheim et al. 2003, Marcou and Wollmann 2008, p.139 et seq.) Hungary presents a doubly peculiar case. After 1989, this country became the most decentralized one with the politically and functionally strongest local authorities among the other transformation countries and beyond. By contrast, since 2011, under the right-wing government under Victor Orban, Hungary has experienced a radical re-centralization of the entire politico-administrative system; the local authorities were stripped of many of their functions and put under stringent central government control (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p.171 et seq.).

As a result of different state traditions and different rates of decentralization the scope of local government functions varies significantly between European countries. Judging, as indicator, by the municipal expenses as per cent of GDP (in 2007) (see Baldersheim and Rose 2010, p. 3, table 1.1.) three 'Nordic' countries (Denmark, Sweden and Finland not surprisingly (with 32.2, 24.5 and 19.3 percent respectively) top the ranking while Italy and France (with 15.1 and 11.2 percent) hold a middle rung and Greece (with 2.5 percent) comes out at the low end. (For another largely congruent 2005 data set see Marcou and Wollmann 2008, 143, figure 1).

Until the collapse of the Communist regime in 1990 the Soviet Union was marked by the Post-Stalinist model of extremely centralist one-party rule under which, premised on the doctrine of the "Unity of the State", all subnational (regional and local) levels (as well as societal spheres) were bereft of any autonomy and meant to serve as subnational and local cogs in the centralist state machinery (see Wollmann 2004b). In the wake of the reforms (perestroika) initiated by Michal Gorbachov since the late 1980s and following the break-up of the Soviet Union in late 1990 Russia emerged as federal country made up of 85 federal regions ("federal subjects"), including two "federal States" (the capital Moscow and St. Petersburg). The new Constitution adopted in 1993 gave the regions (which during the turbulent transition period under President El'tsin had unfolded almost "secessionist" dynamics) far-reaching powers. At the same time, the article 12 of the Constitution laid down that "the bodies of local self-government shall not be part of the State power bodies" (see Gel'man 2008, 71, Wollmann 2004b, 212, Khabrieva et al. 2008, 97.), hereby conspicuously breaking with the Soviet doctrine of the "unity of the State". Since becoming President in March 2000 Vladimir Putin has resolutely moved towards re-centralizing the country's intergovernmental system and to establish a top-down 'vertical power' structure to bring the regions back under central government ('presidential') control and to accordingly subdue the local authorities to the central government's rigid command and supervision. Flying in the face of the constitutional promise of art 12 Russia the country has turned back to "statelize" (ogosudarstvlenie) local government (Gel'man 2008, 71), thus reviving the centralist legacy and imprint of the Soviet past.

In the USA the Constitution in 1789 has been based on the concept of a "dual sovereignty" according to which (the now 50) States and the federal government are deemed to have separate and independent spheres with each sovereign in their own affairs (see Savitch and Vogel 2005, 219). Hence, the legislation on the local government level lies with the individual States each having its own legislative framework on local government. Consequently, there are practically "some fifty American local government systems" (Sellers 2008, 238). Under the so-called Dillon's rule which was historically inherited from British ultra vires doctrine the local authorities can exercise only the functions explicitly assigned to them by their State. However, in the meantime all but three States have granted the local authorities so-called "home rule" powers by virtue of which local governments have, in practice,



reached a great deal of legislative, operational and fiscal autonomy (see Sellers 2008, 237, Savitch and Vogel 2005, 220).

The Latin American countries had gained independence from colonial rule in the 1810s and 1820s and fell under military dictatorship during the 1970 and 1980s. Terminating military during the 1980s they embarked upon decentralization and democratization. This process was significantly propelled by the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank that emphasized and financially fostered the role of local government in the promotion of economic development (see Rosales and Carmona 2008, p.171 et seq., Kersting et al. 2009, p.77 et seq.). A prominent example is Brazil (with some 200 million inhabitants the largest Latin American country). Following the end of the military regime a new constitution was adopted in 1988, which defined the newly established federal system as an “indissoluble union of states and municipalities and the federal district” (i.e. the capital), thus constitutionally recognizing the federal status of the municipalities (besides the 26 federal States) and granting them full autonomy (see Rosales and Carmona 2008, 175, also on Mexico’s similar development. Strengthening the political autonomy of local government has been a major feature of the recent decentralization process in Latin American countries (Nickson 2019, 140). However, while national legislation has usually granted local government general competence-type autonomy, the municipalities have rarely taken the initiative to expand their own mandate due to their continuing financial, technical and political weakness (Kersting et al. 2009, 83). (For an overview on all Latin American countries see Rosales and Carmona 2008, Kersting et al. 2009 with country reports on Bolivia, Chile and Paraguay).

In (South) Asia-Pacific countries, following the end of colonial rule and their often-conflict-ridden independence process between 1945 and 1947 institution-building in these countries was typically confronted with the problem of what has been aptly called “internal de-colonization” (Vajpeyi 2003, 11). That is, with the task of coping with and overcome the institutional and mental legacies left by their respective (British, French or Dutch) colonial past. Thus, the new national elites took over not only many of institutions inherited from the colonial era, but also the mental attitude and pattern to govern from the center and to treat the local level and its native leaders as subject to paternalistic and top-down rule (see Baldersheim and Wollmann 2006, 117). Consequently, when moves towards decentralization and democratization got under way during the 1990s – also promoted by international donors - they showed a great variance in timing; scale and modality still shaped by the country’s specific colonial legacy (see Nickson et al. 2008, 53).

India (with about one billion inhabitants the second largest country in the world – second to China with some 1.4 billion people) is a case in point. Historically, rural India was marked by ‘panchayats’ (village assemblies) that date back to ancient times and which after 1857 when India came under British colonial rule were largely side-lined or instrumentalized for central British colonial administration (see Vajpeyi and Arnold 2003, 34). It is true, the Federal Constitution of 1950 that was adopted after India’s independence and laid the ground for federal system, required that “the

(federal) States shall take steps to organize village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of local self-government”. But during years to come the (federal) States failed to live up to the constitutional mandate particularly with regard to bulk of rural villages. Finally in 1992 an amendment to the Constitution was adopted which explicitly recognized a three-tier local government structure as a third government level (below the national and State levels) and stipulated that in every State “at the village, intermediate and district levels...panchayats” shall be constituted and elected “from territorial constituencies in the panchayat area” (see Vajpeyi and Arnold 2003, 39). Thus, the institutionalization of local government and local democracy has made a significant step forward. However, the constitutional mandate to implement administrative and fiscal decentralization has still not complied with to the same extent in all (federal) States (see Nickson et al. 2008, 57). Besides, as it was critically observed, the “panchayat system is often unable to function effectively due to the embedded nature of bureaucracy, the low level of political consciousness and the feudal and patriarchal structures of the society” (Tremblay 2003,34), in other words, due, not least, to the still unfinished business of ‘de-colonialization’.

In Indonesia (with 260 million people another major Asian country) the Regional Development Law of 1999 has triggered a sweeping (‘big bang’) decentralization which has significantly shifted resources and responsibilities from the central and provincial levels to the urban and rural municipalities (see Nickson et al. 2008, 58, Kersting et al. 2009,171 et seq.).(On the development of decentralization and local democracy in other South Asian see the country chapters in Vajpeyi 2003 and Baldersheim and Wollmann 2009, p.117 et seq.).

In the (some 50) countries of Sub-Saharan Africa that, with the end of colonial rule, have become independent states during the 1960s and 1970s decentralization reforms have been approached since the 1980s. They, too, showed marked differences depending on their colonial (French or British) colonial past: Francophone countries, such as Mali, Burkina Faso, tended to treat decentralization as a technique for managing a centralized unitary state, while in Anglophone countries, such as South Africa and Nigeria, federal structures have been adopted and decentralization has been associated with the constitutional recognition of the local government level (see Letaief et al. 2008, 24 et seq., Kersting et al. 2009, 130). In the majority of African countries decentralization was imposed from the top down, making it more the tool used by central government to control territory and population. A crucial problem of making local institutions work partly was to reconcile traditional (tribal) community structures (chiefdoms) with modern national institutions. Subsequently despite constitutional and legislative provisions and safeguards the autonomy of local government has remained restricted by central government oversight of local government bodies and their actions (Letaief et al. 2008, 46). The latter obstacle has been compounded by the spread of the one-party state in many African countries (see Baldersheim and Wollmann 2006, 116). Throughout the African countries , decentralization has often been fraught with political instability and most notably with



ethnic and tribal conflicts. In the meantime, the process of decentralization and local level government reforms has often been stalled and even reverted (see Kersting et al. 2009, p. 128).

However, noteworthy progress in decentral and democratic institution-building has been made in South Africa (with some 55 million inhabitants the second largest Sub-Saharan African country). Following the end of the Apartheid regime, the Constitution adopted in 1997 has installed, within a three-tier federal system (central, provincial and local), a local government level (see Cameron 2008, 316 et seq., Kersting et al, 2009, 139 et seq.). Consequently, local government has undergone a significant transition from the previous apartheid setting towards a more democratic system (see Cameron 2008, 322). Local elections that were peacefully held in 1994 and 2000 signaled a viable future development. (For a cautioning assessment see Baldersheim and Wollmann 2006, 117).

### **3. Territoriality**

Seeking and defining the (optimal) territorial size (scale) of local government has been marked in many countries by the choice and balancing (“trade-off”) between enhancing its operational efficiency of local government and buttressing local democracy (see Baldersheim and Rose 2010b, p.8 et seq.).

In European countries the local level territorial structure was historically characterized by predominantly small-size municipalities. In the more recent territorial development two country groups can be discerned (see De Ceunick et al. 2019, Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p.185 et seq.).

On the one side, in the UK, Sweden and in some German federal regions (Länder) during the 1960 and 1970s a first wave of territorial reforms got under way aimed to territorially and demographically enlarge (‘upscale’) the municipalities by way of consolidation (amalgamation), if need be, through ‘coercive’ legislation against local opposition (see country reports in Baldersheim and Rose 2010a). This reform drive was premised on the then dominant ‘rationalistic’ assumption that the local level territorial consolidation could enhance the economic and operational efficiency of the local authorities and their capacity to cope with the ever-growing scope of tasks that were transferred to them by the expanding national welfare state. Thus, there was close conceptual and operational tie between local territorial reforms and decentralization/ ‘functional reform’ (see above section 2, see also Marcou and Wollmann 2008, 136)). The UK went furthest, in 1974, in this strategy of large-scale amalgamation ( often identified as the ‘North European pattern’, see Norton 1994, 40) by reducing some 1.300 lower tier local (district and borough) governments to 369 and in resulting in the unparalleled average of 129.000 inhabitants (see Wilson and Game 2011, 78 et seq., Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, 187) . In Sweden, too, in 1974 the number of municipalities (kommuner) was cut back from 2.282 (averaging some

2.800 inhabitants) to 290 (averaging some 31.000) (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p.189 et seq.). Since the 1990s in some countries a second wave of large-scale territorial ‘upscaling’ has taken place - with Denmark’s territorial reform of 2007 tackling a veritable “revolution in local government” (Mouritzen 2010, 21) by cutting the number of municipalities from 275 to 98 with an averaging 55.480 inhabitants (now the second largest average among European countries).

On the other side, in some European countries, exemplified by France, Italy and Switzerland, local level territorial consolidation has not been undertaken in what has been identified as the ‘South European pattern’ (see Norton 1994, 40). In these countries the politically and culturally rooted principle of “voluntariness” has prevailed according to which the boundaries of municipalities can be redrawn only with local consent. Exemplar is France where the boundaries of some 36.000 municipalities, averaging some 1.500 inhabitants, have remained largely unchanged since the Revolution of 1789 and earlier (see Kuhlmann/Wollmann 2014, 191.). Another striking case is Switzerland with very small municipalities (half of them having less than 840 inhabitants) whose boundaries have remained unchanged in the last 150 years (see Kibler and Ladner 2003, 140).

In Central Eastern European (CEE) countries after 1990 the fragmented structure of small-size municipalities inherited from the communist era has been largely retained often for the political motive of not impairing the newly restored small-scale local democratic arenas. On the top of it, the number of small-scale municipalities has even increased as local communities were given the right and opportunity to undo territorial amalgamations imposed under the previous communist regime (see country reports in Swaniewicz 2010). For instance, in Hungary the number of municipalities jumped from some 1.600 before 1990 to 3.170 afterwards (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, 198, on the Czech Republic see *ibid*, 199).

Depending on whether or on which scale local level territorial reforms have been carried out the average population size varies greatly ranging between 139,000 (UK) and 1,700 (France), is between 10.000 and 20.000 in another four countries and less than 10.000, often around 5.000, in all other countries (for 2008 data covering 30 European countries on the number, average population size and percentage of municipalities with less than 5.000 inhabitants see Baldersheim and Rose 2010b, p. 3, table 1.1.).

While the purpose and “logic” of (large-scale) amalgamation can be seen to “internalize” the coordination of multiple functions and actors (intra-municipally) within the (enlarged) jurisdiction of local government (see Wollmann 2010), by contrast in countries without amalgamation an alternative strategy (and “logic”) to achieve such coordination of functions and actors can be seen in at creating institutional forms of inter-municipal cooperation. In the European context France is, in view of the historic small-size pattern of its municipalities not surprisingly, exemplar of such alternative strategy. Dating back to the 1890s, intermunicipal bodies (*établissements publics de coopération intercommunale*, EPCI) have been established which are designed, be it as single-purpose or as multiple-purpose entities, to assist

their member municipalities in the provision of services. They are directed by councils that are not directly elected but appointed by the member municipalities (for details see Borraz and Le Galès 2005, Wollmann 2010). The complex system and network of intermunicipal bodies (*intercommunalité*) was (in 2015) made up of total of 2.133 EPCI's of different types that are endowed with taxing power (*à fiscalité propre*) comprise 36.588 member municipalities and 62.9 million inhabitants (for details and data see Kuhlmann/Wollmann 2019, p.195 table 4.7). In other countries, too, which, in the absence of territorial reforms, are marked by a multitude of small-scale municipalities similar intermunicipal bodies are galore (see Marcou and Wollmann 2008, p. 138).

Still another variant of intermunicipal bodies has been embarked upon in France since 2018 by the creation of metropolitan entities (so-called *métropoles*) in and around France's 21 major cities and urban areas. Constituting the most integrated yet organizational form of intermunicipal cooperation the *métropoles* vertically combine most functions of their (continuing to exist) member municipalities, also some functions of the territorially connected *départements* and levy most of the municipal taxes. However, their decision-making councils are still indirectly elected by the councils of their member municipalities. The largest *métropole* is "Grand Paris" in and around the capital city of Paris - with some 7 million inhabitants and 131 member municipalities (see Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2019, p.193 et seq. for a similar development in Italy with the formation of 14 metropolitan intermunicipal entities, *città metropolitana* see *ibid.*, p. 170).

The recent development of intermunicipal bodies, including metropolitan entities, hints at a trend towards some gradual territorial consolidation as the institutions of intermunicipal cooperation appear, in the absence of formal consolidation, to prepare the political and mental ground for fully fledged consolidation (for an overview and differentiated conclusions see Baldersheim and Rose 2010b).

The Russian Federation which resulted from the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1990 still is the territorially largest country in the world with some 17 million square kilometers the largest country in the world (and counting some 144 million inhabitants). By 2005 the map of Russia's two-tier local government system has been extensively redrawn by the regions (federal subjects). The number of municipalities almost doubled from 12.215 to 24.079 as the formal local government has been extended to all settlements of more than 1.000 inhabitants (Khabrieva et al. 2008, 104). At the same time, the municipal districts (*munitsipal'nye raiony*) have been introduced as units of a new (upper) local government level whose decision-making bodies are made of mayors of the member municipalities. While, thus, the multitude of settlements are included in the local government structure it is organizationally ascertained that they serve as key links in the hierarchy of administration and its vertical power mechanism (Gel'man 2008, 81), thus reinforcing the vertical and centralist (presidential) power grip.

In the US, the two-tier local government structure is made of 3.043 counties as well as 19.372 municipalities and 16.629 townships and towns (see Scanton 2002, p.

213 table 13.1, Sellner 2008, 239). Despite the great number of often small municipalities hardly any territorial consolidation by way of amalgamation has over the years occurred (see Sellner 2008, *ibid.*). This applies even to the larger and big cities and their mushrooming suburban hinterland. The reason for this plausibly lies essentially in racial and ethnic divide between ('white') suburbs and ('colored') central core cities with either side politically blocking amalgamation (see Sancton 2002, 190).

As an alternative strategy to provide local level public services typically 'special purpose' bodies (school districts and special purpose districts) have been created outside the ('general purpose') local authorities and often territorially transcending them. Comparable to the intermunicipal bodies frequent in European countries they are meant to perform specific (primarily single purpose) functions (schools, public utilities, services etc.), sometimes possessing local taxing power of their own. (see Sellers 2008, 237). In some the directing boards are chosen by separate direct elections, in others they are composed of representatives of member local authorities. Amounting in a total of 50.432 units (in 2007) they by far outnumber the some 36.000 (general purpose) local governments. The rapid rise of special purpose districts from some 18.000 in 1962 to some 34.000 in 1997 (figures from Scanton 2005, p. 213) the growing importance they have in US local government besides and also in place of the 'general purpose' local authorities.

Moreover, in order to cope with the demographically and functionally mushrooming metropolitan areas various strategies of intermunicipal cooperation have been embarked upon among which different forms of overarching metropolitan government have come to loom large (see Sellers 2008, 239, Sellers and Hoffmann-Martinot 2008, p.237 et seq.). Typically, such (sometimes still informal and but also formally institutionalized) metropolitan arrangements, geared to specific functions, consist of multiple municipalities and counties mostly along with and revolving around the respective central city. For instance, the city region of San Francisco comprises 90 municipalities and 9 counties with a total of 6.78 million inhabitants of whom 10,9 percent live in San Francisco as the central city proper. Reflecting the characteristic aversion against amalgamation these processes of "metropolitization" have gone without annexation of or merger of municipalities.

In Latin American countries, the local level is marked by a somewhat paradoxical territorial structure. On the one hand, it shows high degree of territorial fragmentation even called "atomization" (see Rosales and Carmona 2008, 129) with around 90 percent of all municipalities in the region having fewer than 50.000 inhabitants (see Nickson 2019, 134). Typically, the countries have typically refrained from territorial consolidation (amalgamation) as redrawing local boundaries has been politically resisted by the culturally embedded understanding of local autonomy (see Nickson 2019, Kersting et al. 2009, 79). On the top of it in some countries the numbers of (small-sized) municipalities have even increased, in part, as in the case of Argentina, even doubled. On the other hand, a small number of municipalities of the region count among the largest cities in the world, such as Mexico City (with 26 million

inhabitants) and Sao Paulo (with 24 million inhabitants). While the city boundaries notwithstanding the demographically exploding metropolitan areas have hardly been redrawn (rescaled) (see Nickson 2019, 134) many forms of intermunicipal cooperation, such as mancomunidades, have emerged (ibid., p. 140), particularly around central cities and adjacent metropolitan areas (see Rosales and Carmona 2008, 180). In Brazil, remarkably under the military regime nine metropolitan cities were created, such as the (Metropolitan) Municipality of Sao Paulo, with some 13 million inhabitants the largest Latin American city while Sao Paulo's metropolitan area comprises 22 million people. However, in only few of metropolitan areas in Latin American countries a functioning metropolitan system of government has been put in place that would allow them to manage their territory in an integrated manner (for details see Rosales and Carmona 2008, p.129 et seq., Kersting et al. 2009, 80 et seq.).

In the Asia-Pacific region there is a great variance in the number and population size of municipalities (for an overview and list of the territorial organization of local government in the Asia Pacific region see Nickson et al. 2008, tables 3 and 4). Japan stands out as having carried out large-scale local level territorial reforms that, in two waves (1953 and 2001) reduced the number from some 6.000 to 1.820 (see Norton 1994, 457, Nickson et al. 2008, 64). In South-Asian countries there is often a mix of modern local government structures and of traditional or customary village institutions (see Nickson et al. 2008, 60, for an overview see ibid, table 3). Due to rampant urbanization (the population dwelling in urban areas has multiplied by seven since 1950) the countries have experienced a rampant expansion of metropolitan areas (see Sellers and Hofmann-Martinot 2008, 261) The top ten of the hundred largest metropolitan areas in the world are located in Asia-Pacific countries; of these Tokyo Metropolis (or Greater Tokyo Area) is the most populous (with some 38 million inhabitants) consisting of Tokyo (with 9 million) and some 20 neighboring cities.

In most Sub-Saharan African countries hardly, any amalgamations have been carried out at the local level (for an overview see Letaief et al. 2008, table 1). However, following the end of the Apartheid regime in the early 1990s, in South Africa a large-scale local level amalgamation has been effected which, as an essential component of its decentralization programme of 1998 and crucial political goal, aimed at abolishing the racially separated settlement structure and at creating racially mixed and integrated municipalities (see Cameron 2008, Kersting et al. 2009, 139 et seq., Baldersheim and Wollmann 2009, 116); the number of municipalities was drastically reduced from some 1.000 to 284 averaging 62.000 and 6.000 inhabitants (see Kersting et al. 2009, 141). At the same time, six metropolitan municipalities were created by amalgamation, for instance, the City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality (with some 960.000 inhabitants) as the core city of the adjacent metropolitan area (counting some 7.8 million people (see Sellers and Hoffmann-Martinot 2008, 271).

## 4. Local democracy

The theme of local democracy is taken up in the following along two institutional tracks, for one, regarding the (representative democratic as well as direct democratic) rights and procedures empowering local citizens to influence local political decision-making and, second, as to determining local politico-administrative leadership.

In Europe, in a tradition dating back to the 19th century, Switzerland stands out singularly in giving citizens at all (federal, cantonal and local) levels of government the (direct democratic) right to determine political decision making (see Ladner and Kübler 2003). In 80 percent of Swiss municipalities local political decision-making lies with (direct democratic town-meeting type) assemblies of citizens instead of elected local councils). Moreover, local referendums on a broad scope of issues (local taxes etc.) are galore. On the average the Swiss citizens are invited to vote in local, cantonal and federal referendums on up to 30 subjects every year (ibid. 144). (For a cautioning assessment, such as on low voter turn, socio-economically “biased” interest assertion, see ibid. 144).

By contrast, in the other European countries historically the principle of representative democracy has prevailed according to which the local citizens are entitled (and restricted) to elect the local councils as the supreme (parliament-type) local decision-making bodies. However, since the 1990s in an increasing number of countries, as a complement to local representative democracy, local referenda, both consultative and binding, have been introduced. In some countries, such as in Germany, binding local referendums have gained increasing frequency and considerable impact on local decision-making, at times revoking decisions made by the elected council (see Vetter et al. 2016, 277).

Tellingly even in countries in which the principle of representative democracy has been firmly entrenched in the country’s political tradition and culture direct democratic procedures have been adopted. A striking case is the U.K. where in 1998 regional referendums were held in Scotland and Wales (resulting in establishing regional parliamentary assemblies and ushering in a ‘quasi-federal’ regional autonomy) (see Wilson and Game 2011, 98 et seq.) and in 2004 a regional referendum was conducted in Scotland on its becoming independent (rejected by a thin majority). The most conspicuous example was the recent national referendum held on June 23, 2016 on whether the UK should leave (‘Brexit’) or remain in the EU (with a thin majority of 52 percent voting for leaving). But also, on the local level matters direct democratic procedures have advanced, for instance, in the 2000 legislation giving the local citizens right to decide, by local referendum, to opt for the direct election of mayors (ibid. p.113 et seq.).

As to local leadership in Europe, historically two schemes have evolved both based on the representative democracy principle (see country reports in Berg and Rao



2005, Reynaert et al. 2009, for comparative overviews see Wollmann 2009, Copus et al. 2016, Lidström et al. 2016). In the ‘government by committee’ variant, which was in place in the UK and in Sweden, sector-specific committees of the elected local councils were in charge of making the relevant decisions as well of directing and overseeing the respective administrative units. By contrast, in the ‘council mayor systems’ that has been practiced throughout Continental European countries the elected councils are the prime decision-making bodies while, in a kind of local parliamentary system, a council-elected executive (mayor) carries out the council’s decisions besides some responsibilities of his own. In reaction to growing criticism for democratic (accountability) and operative deficits both systems have, since the 1990s, been reformed. In the ‘government by committees’ scheme, the politico-administrative leadership has been, grosso modo, shifted to a (parliamentary system-type) political council leader. By contrast, the traditional council mayor systems have been changed, visibly leaning on the US American example, towards a kind of local presidential system by introducing the directly elected executive (‘strong’) mayor. Germany took the lead as, since the beginning of the 1990s, all *Länder* have introduced the directly elected (executive) mayor - in some *Länder* along with recall procedures. Moreover, the direct election of the mayors has been adopted in other Continental European countries (with the exception, for instance, of France,) as well as, in the wake of post-communist transformation, in Central Eastern European countries (see Copus et al. 2016, Marcou and Wollmann 2008, p. 155 et seq.).

In the Russian Federation, after the collapse of the Communist regime, a first major step towards creating democratic local government and to ensuring its autonomy was set by the adoption of the law “on local government” of July 6, 1991 in which, among others, the election of the local councils as well as the direct election of mayor (‘head of administration’) was laid down (see Wollmann 2004b). However, following the abortive putsch by Communist Party hardliners in August 1991 and the ensuing fierce power struggle, the already scheduled direct election of the mayors was postponed; instead the mayors were appointed by the by President Eltsin in a move to consolidate the (presidential) ‘vertical power’ grip. Later on, in 2005, the mayors got directly elected throughout the country municipalities subsequently, as soon as in 2012 Putin became President, the position of the mayors as pivots of local democracy has been gradually undermined on two scores. For one, borrowing from the US example, new legislation has introduced the position of a city manager who, as the newly appointed local chief executive, came rival with and side-lined the elected mayor; in the meantime, the city manager scheme has been installed in most municipalities as directly or indirectly appointed by the regional governor. Second, under new legislation the direct election of the mayors can be abolished, and the sitting mayors can be dismissed by the regional governor (as an arm of the President) (see Buckley et al. 2014). By now, mid-2018, in only 7 out of 85 regional capital cities the mayors still keep being directly elected. It appears that the elected mayors are about to vanish signaling the political and functional degradation local

government has undergone in Putin`s era.

In the USA, direct democratic local citizen rights have since long been part and parcel of the country`s democratic tradition making the USA, besides Switzerland, virtually the homeland of direct democracy. Since the 1820s the direct election of mayors and even judges, sheriffs and other local position-holders has been introduced (see Norton 1994, 394). Currently only three of 50 States do not have legal provisions on some type of local level direct democratic procedures, including binding local referendums. On the top of it, ‘home rule’ provisions have been adopted in some States that give the local councils the right to adopt direct democratic procedures on their own).

For determining local leadership two main variants have historically been in place (see Norton 1994, 421). For one, the local council – directly elected (executive – strong) mayor form which is common in larger cities) and, second, the local council – (council-appointed) city manager system which has been increasingly adopted (see Sellers 2008, 248). In the last decades a gradual mix or ‘hybridization’ of both forms has taken shape with a trend towards “executive-centered governance” (Savitch and Vogel 2005, 213). Besides, recall procedures for local officials are legally provided for in about half of the States.

When Latin American after having fallen under military and authoritarian rule between the 1960s and 1980s returned to democratic government during the mid-1980s they moved to reinstall local democracy as well (see Rosales and Carmona 2008, 171). By 2008 all countries in the region, except Cuba, had free local level elections (see Kersting et al. 2009, 79). Influenced by the USA example, the directly elected (executive – strong) mayor form made its entry in the Latin American countries, along with recall procedures in some of them. However, the political practice is often still marred by the centralist legacy of caudillismo (‘political bossism’) and a personalist political culture that tends to accentuate one-person leadership and to marginalize the role of the elected councilors (see Nickson 2019, 144). As to direct democratic citizen rights in Brazil the Constitution of 1988 laid down various forms of direct popular participation besides regular voting, such as referendums and the right of citizens to propose new laws, including direct democratic and participatory local citizen rights. The local participatory budget process which directly involves the local community in formulating the plans for municipal investments was first applied (between 1989 and 2004) in the city of Porto Alegre. In attracting world-wide attention and recognition as a remarkable direct democratic innovation participatory budgeting has since spread to other Latin American countries and beyond (see Rosales and Carmona 2008, 196, Kersting et al. 2009, 112; on the spill-over of participatory budgeting unto European countries see Kersting et al. 2016). However, by the 2010s there has been a widening gap between the envisaged and proclaimed citizen participation in local government and the sobering reality throughout the region (Nickson 2019, 146).

In the (some 50) Sub-Saharan African countries from the 1970s onward, steps have been undertaken, also prodded by international financial donors, to establish

democratic local government as an important lever for economic development (see Kersting et al. 2009, 128). In a positive assessment of the development “local elections are being held with regularity unprecedented in the history of Africa” (Letaief et al. 2008, 44). However, as to the political reality, observers speak of a “systematic decline and death of local democracy” (Kersting et al. 2009, 128) as “national as well as local, tribal and family loyalties and traditions impact on civic behavior at the local level” (ibid. 150).

Again, South Africa stands out as a positive example. The municipal legislation of 1998 laid down parliamentary-type local government system made up of an elected council and a council-elected executive mayor. At the same time, it emphasizes the direct democratic participation in local decision-making (for details see Kersting et al. 2009, pp. 153 et seq., Cameron 2008, p.318 et seq.). The latter shows particularly in the provision, within each municipality, of ‘ward committees’ which are seen as crucial to allow different (social, ethnic etc.) groups to participate, on a voluntary basis, in local decision-making (ibid., 158, for a cautioning assessment see ibid. 159).

## **5. Concluding remarks**

### **5.1. Brief concluding notes on the development and state of research on local politics and government**

The following remarks on the ‘state of art’ of the research on local politics and government are again bound to be sketchy and ‘broad brush’ (for a more detailed and referenced discussion see the chapters in Baldersheim and Wollmann 2006a, particularly the historical overview by Goldsmith 2006 and the summarizing article by Baldersheim and Wollmann 2006b).

Since the 1940s well unto the 1960s political science research on local politics and government was primarily led by US American scholars teaching and working in numerous academic institutions and benefiting from the abundant research funding then available in the US.

Since the 1970s the relevant research networks and topics have internationally and thematically greatly expanded. In 1970 the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) was formed which has come to encompass more than 350 institutions throughout Europe, with associate members across the world and its Standing Group on Local Government and Politics (see Hoffmann-Martinot 2006, 92). In 1972 the Research Committee on the Comparative Study of Local Government and Politics, at first chaired by Franco Kjellberg, was formed within the International Political Science Association (IPSA) (the latter having been founded in 1950). Similarly, in 1975 the Research Commission on Urban and Regional Development, at first chaired by Terry Clark, was established within the International Sociological Association (the latter founded in 1952).

By thus widening the international outreach and composition of researchers the

“Anglo-Saxon-centricity” that marked the earlier research discourse and agenda has been significantly recalibrated and shifted. The annual conferences and workshops of the ECPR and its Standing Groups and the ensuing publications have greatly contributed to the European research community developing a profile and self-confidence of its own (see Goldsmith 2006, 15). Besides, in the wake of the collapse of the communist regime a broad, albeit relatively short-lived stream of publication set in on the subnational/local political and administrative transformation in Central-Eastern European countries and in the Russian Federation.

The research on subnational/local politics and government in European countries has recently been significantly promoted by EU-funded international research consortium (within the EU’s COST programme) that focused on ‘on local public sector reforms in Europe’. It has generated a ‘wave’ of publications, among others, on ‘Local Public Sector Reforms in Times of Crisis’ (Kuhlmann and Bouckaert 2016) and on ‘Public and Social Services in Europe, From Public and Municipal to Private Service Provision’ (Wollmann et al. 2016).

While thus the focus and arena of the on ongoing political science debate and research on local politics and government have become somewhat “Europeanized”, research and publications in and on the ‘developing countries’ appear to have remained quite scarce.

An important impulse to close this gap and to open up a global perspective, particularly on the ‘developing’ countries, has recently come from United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (the world-wide umbrella organization for cities, local and regional governments, and municipal associations) as UCLG has initiated, organized and edited a series of ‘global reports’ that are researched on and authored by scholars and experts from and on these ‘global’ regions. Tellingly the UCLG’s first ‘global report’ was on ‘decentralization and democratization’ (GOLD I, see UCLG 2008). Its ‘regional chapters’ make for a valuable research and information source which accordingly has been amply drawn on and quoted in writing this article. In the meantime, other equally important and substantive reports have been published by UCLG, to wit, on ‘local government finance’ (GOLD II), on ‘basic services’ (GOLD III) and on ‘co-creating the urban future’ (GOLD IV) (see UCLG 2010, 2014, 2017 respectively).

## **5.2. Convergence or divergence in a global perspective?**

[In conclusion, the question shall be addressed as to whether, to which degree and why the institutional development highlighted in the preceding account shows convergence or divergence in a global perspective.](#)

Although varying in phase, dynamics and contents, there have been convergent general (‘macro’) trends since 1945 in the countries world-wide towards decentralization and strengthening local government and local democracy. The trends have been triggered and carried forward by politically, historically and contextually different factors and events: As to the ‘developing’ countries, in Latin American

countries (during the 1980s) following the end of military rule, in Central Eastern European countries and Russia (after 1990) on the heels of the collapse of communist and in South Asian countries (after 1945) and in the Sub-Saharan African countries (from the 1970s onwards) following the end of colonial rule. In other 'developed' countries decentralizing and strengthening local government gained traction with the post-war expansion of the national welfare state and the related transfer of tasks to the local authorities while further democratization has, since the 1970s, been promoted by the rising demands for enhancing (local) citizens' rights to influence and hold accountable policy-making..

However, while falling in line with these 'macro trends' the countries have shown significant variance in the course and outcomes of these developments due to different political, historical and cultural givens and forces. In South Asian as well as in Sub-Saharan African countries, decentralization and local democracy-targeted reforms have, after promising start-ups, been retarded, truncated or stalled by persisting institutional and mental legacies of their colonial past, by continuing tribal, ethnic and religious conflicts, their often dismal socio-economic and financial conditions and, last not least, by corrupted political elites (see Baldersheim/Wollmann 2006b, 121). In post-communist countries, such as Russia and Hungary the decentralization and democratization process has been reverted by the return to quasi-authoritarian and centralist government under Putin and Orban.

The rampant urbanization and massive rural-urban in-migration that transcends the existing territorial structure of the local government has become a world-wide crucial challenge. This applies particularly to Asian, African as well as Latin-American countries where, along with unhinged population growth, urbanization and agglomeration in and around mushrooming metropolitan areas has been continuing (see Sellers and Hoffmann-Martinot 2008). Hence, in the global perspective the number and size of the metropolitan regions have experienced an explosive growth. While by 1975 there were five metropolitan regions with more than 10 million inhabitants, nota bene: three of them in developing countries, by 2000 the number of metropolitan areas of this mega-size jumped to 16, take notice: twelve of them in the developing region (see Sellers and Hoffmann-Martinot 2008, 259). At the same time, worldwide the number of middle- and smaller-sized metropolitan regions with big and larger municipalities as core cities in their midst has been increasing as well.

One of the strategies to cope with the challenges of the urbanization process has been to territorially and functionally consolidate (amalgamate, fuse) the local authorities. This strategy has been embarked upon only in a relatively small number of countries and cases (in some European countries during the 1970s, in Japan in 1999 and in South Africa in 1999). Instead, different forms of intermunicipal cooperation and coordination have been sought and experimented with. These various modalities range from informal voluntary and flexible agreements among municipalities to the creation, by way of amalgamating the municipalities concerned, of a new territorially and functionally integrated metropolitan city (see Sellers and Hoffmann-Martinot

2008, 272 et seq.). However, in any variant the ensuing formation mostly covers only part of the factual extension of the surrounding metropolitan region.

Internationally, in the face of worldwide ‘globalized’ competition of transnational corporations about national and local markets particularly the ‘mega-cities’, because of their economic and financial potential and global outreach, also identified as ‘global cities’ (see Sassen 1991) are eager to attract international companies to invest and get located in them. In turn, ‘globalized’ companies experience a “dialectical process (in that) global economic activities become more dispersed but also more embedded in particular territorial settings” (Clarke 2006, 39), that is ‘localized’ in given urban sites. This dialectical logic which both ‘global’ cities and globally operating companies have in common has been dubbed ‘glocalization’ (in linguistically fusing global and local). In other words, global becomes local (politics) and vice versa.

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