Introduction

Back in 2014, Paweł Swianiewicz lamented in a piece published in Local Government Studies that "most of the academic literature on local government treats Eastern Europe either as terra incognita, requiring exploratory investigation in the future, or puts the whole region into one basket described as "new local democracies", coupled with accompanying stereotypes" (Swianiewicz, 2014a: 292). Observed from the south-west corner of Europe, this grievance sounds eerily familiar. In my own experience with scholarly research on local government and politics, I have also encountered a fair share of broad stroke generalizations and stereotypes about the 'Southern European' model or the 'new democracies' of the 1970s when referring to Portugal, Spain and Greece.

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, I review three major contributions to the study of territorial reforms present in the work of Paweł Swianiewicz. Most of his studies were developed in the context of local governments in Central and Eastern European post-communist countries, particularly Poland, but I argue that they have contributed to expanding the knowledge and study of territorial reforms in general. The second aim is to discuss how these contributions have enriched the study of territorial reforms in Western Europe and how they have broadened the scope of the field to encompass new research questions, theoretical approaches and country cases. In reflecting on these contributions, I will highlight the importance of time and space in advancing this research agenda on territorial reforms.

The chapter is divided into five sections. After this introduction, the following three sections review the contributions of Paweł Swianiewicz's writings in three major threads in the study of territorial reforms. Section two focuses on the importance of including inter-municipal cooperation initiatives as part of the discussion of territorial reforms. The third section stresses the combined study of amalgamation and de-amalgamation reforms as two sides of the same coin. Section four highlights the growing role of sub-municipal government units (SMUs) in urban governance. The final section discusses how these contributions have been useful in expanding comparative work and East–West dialogue on territorial reforms. Future research is likely to benefit from this broadened perspective as long as it takes time and space seriously.
Inter-municipal cooperation and territorial reforms

Scholarly interest surrounding territorial reforms of local and regional governments dates back to the 1980s. Early work by Page and Goldsmith (1987) suggests that territorial organization influences several features of local governments, including the scope of functions, the degree of pluralism and the relationship between levels of government. The past decade has witnessed a significant increase in research on the effects of municipal amalgamations. Despite a first wave of amalgamations dating back to the 1950s and 1960s, with a few exceptions (Nelson, 1992), systematic evaluations of these reforms only took place much more recently (see Tavares, 2018 and Gendźwiłł et al, 2020 for reviews). The Western European literature documents evaluations of amalgamations in Austria (Heimisch et al, 2018; Blesse and Roesel, 2019), Denmark (Blom-Hansen, 2010; Kjær et al, 2010; Houlberg and Pedersen, 2015; Blom-Hansen et al, 2016; Bhatti and Hansen, 2019), Finland (Moisio and Uusitalo, 2013; Saarimaa and Tukiainen, 2015), Germany (Roesel, 2017; Blesse and Roesel, 2019; Ebinger et al, 2019), Italy (Garfatti et al, 2020), Norway (Baldersheim and Rose, this volume; Houlberg and Klausen, this volume), Portugal (Rodrigues and Tavares, 2020), Sweden (Hanes and Wikström, 2008; Hanes, 2015; Erlingsson et al, 2020), Switzerland (Steiner, 2003; Soguel and Silberstein, 2015; Steiner and Kaiser, 2017) and The Netherlands (Allers and van Ommeren, 2016; Bikker and van der Linde, 2016). The Swedish case is particularly delayed, since the reform took place in 1948–52 and most evaluation studies published in English date from the 21st century.

Academic works on inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) have evolved as a separate research stream. Initial studies can be traced back to the 1990s in the United States (Bel and Warner, 2016). Early work attempted to identify the main correlates of IMC measured as a percentage of services in a municipality provided jointly with or by other governments (Morgan et al, 1988; Morgan and Hirlinger, 1991) or as the amount of intergovernmental spending (Campbell and Glynn, 1990). These initial efforts were followed by a stream of studies with broader geographical scope, investigating the determinants of service delivery choices, where IMC was seen as one of the alternatives. Preference for IMC was attributed to a mix of production costs savings via economies of scale (Mohr, Deller and Halstead, 2010), lower transaction costs compared to externalization to private firms (Feiock et al, 2003; Shrestha and Feiock, 2011; Hultquist et al, 2017), and minimization of negative externalities and spillovers between local governments (Bel and Warner, 2016).

Until the early 2000s, neither the North American nor the early Western European literature promoted an integrated discussion of IMC and territorial organization reforms. Back in 2002, Swianiewicz made a call for research on a set of topics linking the size of local government, local democracy and efficiency. Among the themes highlighted by the author, one stands out. While discussing the catchment areas of services delivered by local governments, the author asks a series of questions:

How often does it happen that services delivered by one local government serve population in the surrounding units as well? To what extent is this a problem for small local governments in rural areas? How is this situation dealt with? (…) Is the service being delivered when a local government receives special compensation from the state budget? Are there mechanisms of horizontal compensation among local
government budgets? Are there examples of voluntary and compulsory cooperation of local governments? (Swianiewicz, 2002: 25)

What is perhaps most important to highlight in this quote, is the idea that both IMC and territorial reorganization reforms are related to service delivery and should be addressed in an integrated manner. In other words, IMC and amalgamations should not be discussed in isolation, as they can be alternative or complementary ways of accomplishing service delivery goals and/or taking on additional allocation of functions by local governments.

This was later recognized and highlighted in the flagship work on IMC in Western Europe. Hulst and van Monfort’s 2007 edited volume entitled *Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe* was perhaps the most influential book on IMC in a decade. The link between IMC and amalgamations is recognized explicitly in several chapters. Haveri and Airaksinen (2007) report on a survey of local government actors and experts in Finland who support the idea of IMC and amalgamations as strategic alternatives to accomplish increased size and capacity for service delivery. Heinz (2007) recalls the dual outcome – mergers and cooperative approaches – as a result of Germany’s 1967–1977 territorial reform. And while in France IMC was feared as a first step towards amalgamation (West, 2007), in Italy a 1990 law established the Union of Municipalities form desirably leading to permanent mergers in the period of a decade (Fedele and Moini, 2007).

Since the initial call by Swianiewicz (2002), some progress was made to recognize the common features and challenges associated with upscaling strategies such as IMC and amalgamations (Teles, 2016). This work suggests a framework to address upscaling reforms by examining a set of common indicators and trade-offs between alternative reform options: efficiency, capacity, service delivery and democracy. Equally important, empirical studies began to address these upscaling reforms as a package. For example, tentative evidence suggests that economic crises and austerity were likely drivers of increased IMC and amalgamation reforms in several European countries, including Albania, Greece, Ireland, Latvia and Portugal, among others (Raudla and Tavares, 2018; Swianiewicz and Teles, 2018). However, this evidence is less than systematic and, like the chapters in Hulst and van Monfort (2007) and Teles and Swianiewicz (2018), tends to report on single country cases rather than truly comparative research under a common theoretical framework.

**Amalgamation and de-amalgamation reforms**

In the first chapter of the 2002 edited volume *Consolidation or Fragmentation? The Size of Local Governments in Central and Eastern Europe*, Swianiewicz notices that the generalization present in the Sharpe (1995) report was largely exaggerated: neither Western European countries were dominated by consolidation reforms, nor Central-East European countries characterized by extreme fragmentation. Instead, the author stresses the importance of history (tradition) and inertia of the spatial organization to explain the differences between countries.

Besides the importance of time (history) and space, the same work also underscores territorial reforms as a pendulum, swinging between amalgamations and de-amalgamations depending on the emphasis on an increased allocation of functions to local governments or on local identity, autonomy and self-rule. For example, amalgamation reforms took place in Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Bulgaria during the 1970s and 1980s. However, after the regime change in 1990, many countries in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) have
fragmented their local government systems, namely Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, in response to calls for increased local self-rule. Far from being a group of countries with homogenous territorial organization, CEE countries vary from highly fragmented (Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ukraine) to highly consolidated (Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland and Latvia), with others falling in between these extremes (Macedonia, Albania, Slovenia, Croatia and Romania) (Swianiewicz, 2002; 2006). The case of Georgia was the subject of an in-depth case study analysis showing a unique case of successful amalgamation reform under very particular circumstances: a top-down approach facing little resistance from a relatively unengaged populace indicates a deficit of the democratic dimension (Swianiewicz and Mielczarek, 2010).

The nuanced view provided by the work on the CEE countries stresses the idea of going beyond large blocks of countries to study territorial organization and, instead, focusing on historical, economic, social and cultural drivers of reforms. In addition, it clearly indicates that amalgamation and de-amalgamation reforms should be regarded as two sides of the same coin, with preference for one or the other influenced by the particular circumstances and historical context of each country (Kalcheva, this volume). In no other place than the country of Portugal is the importance of examining the timing and spatial context more visible. Portugal is frequently lumped with the United Kingdom, Denmark and Sweden as an example of a country where local governments have a large average size (Steiner et al, 2016), and with Spain, Italy and France as a country with high resistance to territorial reorganization and highly stable municipal borders (Askim et al, 2016). What these classifications usually ignore is the point of departure. Portugal reduced the number of local governments from over 800 to around 230 in the mid-19th century. The timing and the purpose of the reform was distinct from the post-WWII territorial reforms in Western Europe, but history explains this apparent outlier. Local governments in Portugal are larger in population when compared to their European counterparts because they were merged long ago. As a result, territorial boundaries appear resistant to change because no sense of urgency exists in territorial reorganization for service delivery purposes (all municipalities have more than 1,000 residents and the average approaches 35,000). If time (and history) are taken into consideration, the apparent contradiction is solved.

In Swianiewicz (2018a), the author asks whether municipal splits have consequences that mirror those of municipal amalgamations. ‘A positive answer (…) would strengthen the argument that size really matters’ (6), but the current state of the field provides very few instances where scholars have undertaken empirical analysis of municipal splits or de-amalgamations (exceptions include Drew and Dollery, 2014; de Souza et al, 2015; Swianiewicz and Łukomska, 2019). The results are still tentative and inconclusive, which again suggests that more research is needed. The examples highlighted in this section serve to illustrate the importance of taking a long-term perspective in the analyses of territorial reforms. They also show that the starting point of the analysis is relevant to understanding the pro-consolidation or pro-fragmentation tendencies prevailing on a given country or region.

**SMUs of government in urban governance**

The study of neighbourhood government has a long history associated with the public administration and political science literatures. Chaskin and Garg (1997) analysed the likelihood of success of community-based initiatives associated with their relationship with
local governments, issues of representation, legitimacy and connection, and long-term viability. Wagenaar (2007) underscored neighbourhoods as socially complex systems where citizen participation and deliberation can be effective tools in harnessing complexity. Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) highlight civic, social, political and economic rationales for neighbourhood governance. The authors go on to argue that the promises of neighbourhood governance can only be fulfilled by overcoming challenges of capacity, competence, diversity and equity, which neighbourhood governments will be forced to address.

Many of these earlier writings about SMUs of government were motivated by wishes to enhance participatory democracy, either by promoting closer proximity between citizens and elected officials or by stimulating civic engagement and cultivating social capital through participatory or deliberative approaches. However, this growing concern with neighbourhood governance was not accompanied by empirical studies focused on the gamut of practical solutions found in cities and municipalities around Europe to tackle the diversity of concerns within their boundaries. Moreover, related to the initial call for the study of amalgamation reforms, Swianiewicz (2002) highlighted the need for ‘decentralization within the municipality’ to improve service delivery access in more remote villages after municipal mergers. Today, this observation seems justified by the mounting evidence underscoring the negative consequences of amalgamations for service delivery and political representation (Tavares, 2018), but at the time this was primarily visible to scholars with an in-depth knowledge of the limitations in public transportation and internet infrastructure and fear of loss of autonomy and representation prevailing in CEE countries (Swianiewicz, 2010a).

The ‘decentralization beyond the municipal tier’ (Navarro and Pano, this volume; Hlepas et al, 2018) is related, therefore, to territorial reforms in many ways. First, SMUs are set up as an attempt to minimize the negative effects of larger municipal size, whether or not this size is generated by amalgamation reforms. Overcrowded services and lower responsiveness by local administrative offices may trigger the establishment of sub-municipal districts capable of improving the quality and proximity of service delivery (Hlepas et al, 2018). Second, larger municipalities tend to be more diverse in economic, social, cultural and environmental terms, thus creating specific demands for services across districts/neighbourhoods. SMUs are more likely to respond to these diverse preferences, promote allocative efficiency goals and restore political trust (Van Assche and Dierickx, 2007; Tavares and Raudla, 2018). Third, in some instances, SMUs of government have a long tradition, and their existence is inextricably linked to local identities and they operate as a doorway for the supply of public services to local residents (Hlepas, 2018; Tavares and Teles, 2018). In the case of amalgamations, it is important for residents to keep the name of their municipality to defend their local identity (Soguel and Silberstein, 2015), and sub-municipal governments can be an alternative solution when this is not a viable choice. Fourth, SMUs also have been created to respond to the needs of citizens living in more remote villages, away from the centre of the city/municipality, often to mitigate the effects of amalgamation reforms (Swianiewicz, 2014b, 2018b).

Despite the obvious connection between amalgamation reforms and the increased interest in SMUs of government, the literature has yet to investigate this link in a systematic manner. Alexander (2013) investigated the effects of amalgamations in the Australian Shire of Buloke and found that ‘post-amalgamation political structures failed to reconcile the diverse and often disparate interests of Buloke’s constituent towns and communities’ (482). More recent work by Jakobsen and Kjaer (2016) on the Danish amalgamation reform suggests an
overrepresentation of the periphery in deliberative bodies of amalgamated municipalities. This is visible in terms of both the number of seats in the council (descriptive representation) and advancement of local interests by elected officials (substantive representation). Still in Denmark, Thuesen (2017) reports on the creation of sub-municipal local councils at the village level in response to municipal amalgamations following the recommendations from outcome-oriented deliberative democracy. The significant number of amalgamation reforms enacted in the past decade (Swianiewicz, 2018a), justifies a closer look at the consequences for the territory and citizens in amalgamated municipalities.

A research agenda on territorial reforms: taking time and space seriously

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of the 2002 edited volume Consolidation or Fragmentation? The Size of Local Governments in Central and Eastern Europe is the research agenda it triggered based on the initial sets of questions proposed by its editor. Most of the research topics mentioned in the Introduction and the Conclusion of this volume, including IMC, territorial reforms and SMUs were either understudied or completely ignored at the time in mainstream political science and public Administration research. Since then, they became standard topics in the field and significant progress has been made from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoint. Currently, the bulk of research on each of these topics can be useful for politicians, policy-makers and managers.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted three major contributions of the work of Paweł Swianiewicz in research on territorial reforms. These contributions were decisive in starting a dialogue between Western and CEE local government scholars, which had already produced important additions to the comparative literature (see Swianiewicz, 1992; Swianiewicz, 2010b; Hlepas et al, 2018; Teles and Swianiewicz, 2018). To close this chapter, I link these contributions to the new developments in the field and propose additional topics of research for the coming years.

First, the joint study of IMC and amalgamation reforms has taken the backseat to the investigation of the causes and consequences of each topic individually. Is it possible to improve theoretical development to explain why decision-makers prefer one to the other? Is theory able to predict the effects of these choices? Are IMC and amalgamation reforms complementary or substitute strategies to address limited capacity and scale in the provision of local public services? What factors influence the preferences for one or the other across time and space?

Second, the comparative study of amalgamation and de-amalgamation reforms in Europe has been taking place in a vacuum. While individual case studies value history, actors and social conflict in the enactment of these reforms (Erlingsson et al 2015; 2020), the rare cross-country comparative research has ignored this perspective almost entirely. Why do amalgamation and de-amalgamation reforms occur? What actors play important roles in these processes? How do national and sub-national institutions interact with actors to produce successful or unsuccessful reforms? Why have amalgamation reforms varied in time and space? These questions require a robust theory that involves historical thinking in order to
allow the extraction of more credible hypotheses to be tested with appropriate data, reliable information sources and systematic coding procedures. I believe historical institutionalism as a theoretical perspective and comparative historical analysis as a method have a yet untapped potential to frame the study of amalgamation and de-amalgamation reforms.

Third, the extensive work on the economic, political and managerial effects of municipal amalgamation reforms is not matched by equivalent attention to the consequences affecting neighbourhoods, villages or remote areas in newly amalgamated jurisdictions. Have amalgamations caused citizen disenfranchisement in the neighbourhoods of newly merged municipalities? What were the impacts in terms of social equity and political representation? Have there been efforts to counter such negative effects by relying on alternative participatory strategies (including the enactment or reform of SMUs)? Answers to these questions require a focus on the redistributive effects of territorial reforms, something that has been largely absent from current research agendas, but which must be explored to provide a more comprehensive picture of the effects of amalgamation reforms.

More generally, this research agenda needs to tackle two issues head on. On one hand, one of the most glaring omissions in the comparative study of territorial reforms is the attention paid to their starting point. The limited number of studies that engage in comparisons between reforms typically neglects the starting point for the countries under analysis. In this chapter I attempted to argue that time is a key variable in advancing comparative studies of territorial reforms and that scholars should engage in historical thinking in order to treat these kinds of social and political changes in a more precise manner. On the other hand, the treatment of space also requires an expansion, particularly following Swianiewicz’s call for looking to the other side of the ‘invisible fence’ between Western and CEE countries and finding commonalities in country reforms, irrespective of their location in the European continent. This second major gap in the study of amalgamation reforms requires the investigation of patterns of spatial diffusion employing arguments borrowed from the theory of policy diffusion to understand the mechanisms of adoption (Braun and Gilardi, 2006). Only by taking time and space seriously can local government scholars truly respond to the most pressing questions about territorial reforms.

References


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