

Chapter 10

As You Like It or Much Ado about Nothing? Structural Reform in Local Government in Belgium

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ABSTRACT

This chapter scrutinizes the ongoing debate on structural reform in local government in the Flemish Region of Belgium at the turn and the first decades of the 21st century. As in many European polities, discussions on the territorial and functional arrangements of the level deemed closest to the citizen have occupied a protracted place on the reform agenda. Likewise, given their often controversial and conflictual nature all but a part of these reformist ambitions have eventually been adopted and implemented. Actual structural change often only crystalizes as the residue of a heated reform base once the damp of the discussion evaporates.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter scrutinizes the ongoing debate on structural reform in local government in the Flemish Region of Belgium at the turn and the first decades of the 21st century. As in many European polities, discussions on the territorial and functional arrangements of the level deemed closest to the citizen have occupied a protracted place on the reform agenda. Likewise, given their often controversial and conflict-

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tual nature all but a part of these reformist ambitions have eventually been adopted and implemented. Actual structural change often only crystalizes as the residue of a heated reform base once the damp of the discussion evaporates.

The chapter therefore focuses on the final outcome of consecutive reform schemes in Flanders. Frequently provoking virtually Shakespearian drama amongst a core of stakeholders one may ponder whether, when and for whom these efforts have indeed produced the effects as liked or should rather be considered as very much ado about almost nothing. From a more scientific prospect, the central research question taken up in this chapter is thus whether aspired structural polity alterations have been achieved or not and why this may or may not be the case in the aforementioned setting. In trying to answer that question we argue for a political-decisional perspective assumes that politics matters. Thereto, this chapter will on the one hand describe the evolving institutional change (not) brought about as intended by structural reform policy taking discourse, instruments and strategies into consideration. On the other hand, the chapter aims to account for potential variation in change in assessing the emergent conflicts around structural reform policies and concentrating upon the role of policy entrepreneurs and colligated advocacy coalitions, opponents and ditto veto coalitions and the wider involvement of additional stakeholders.

The Flemish region of Belgium is considered as a critical case to study this question from the associated perspective especially since ongoing processes of regionalization have transferred the organic competency on local government to the meso level at the beginning of the 21st century galvanizing salient debates on structural reform against a coagulated Southern European state tradition. Therefore, in the hearth of this chapter the substance and outcome of this type of reform will be studied and compared for the four consecutive regional legislative eras ever since. Before arriving at this empirical core, we will firstly outline the trends in and approaches for structural reform in local government. Herein, the Belgian context will be situated and explored in the waves of territorial rescaling and functional redistribution that have characterized structural reform policies comparatively. Furthermore, the political-decisional perspective already mentioned will also be placed against the backdrop of an emergent research agenda on structural reform in local government in Europe.

STRUCTURAL REFORM IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT: TRENDS AND APPROACHES

In their comparative assessment of the status of local government at the turn of the 21st century, Caulfield and Larsen (2002) discern a dramatic and sustained period of reform activity as a globally occurring phenomenon often ushering into conspicuous change. Some of these reforms can be determined as of the structural type in that they target the jurisdictional arrangements of local government (as opposed to the internal settings, modes and processes of local political and administrative decision-making). Aiming to alter these arrangements almost invariably impinges upon external multilevel constellations. Consequently, issues of structural reform are embedded in pre-existing and key to shifting central-local relations (Goldsmith & Page, 2010). Broadly speaking, structural reforms are often deemed as part-and-parcel of a common strategy to optimize the output-legitimacy of local government leading to a more effective and efficient production and delivery of public provisions and services in and under the authority of a hitherto delineated place-bound orbit (Vetter & Kersting, 2003a). They tend to have a central top-down policy impetus meeting diverse local bottom-up responses.

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