

# The Métropole era: French urban policy and its effects

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*I welcome any comments on this paper.*

## Introduction

As outlined by the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, French local government systems should formally consist of three main tiers, including the commune (municipality), département, and region. There are approximately 36,000 municipalities, 101 departments, and 18 regions across France. There were also 1,258 public administrative bodies designed for intercommunal cooperation (i.e., établissement public de coopération intercommunale - EPCI) with their own taxation powers as of January 1, 2019. At that time, there were 21 métropoles, 13 urban communities, 223 local agglomerated communities, and 1,001 municipal communities (Bilan statistique 2019). Today, territorial reform could be used to redraw the map of local authority in France.

Municipal territory adjustments based on French socioeconomic realities have addressed long-standing issues. While the nearly 36,000 French municipalities guarantee real proximity to public action, many reforms have attempted to intervene in this political and administrative geography, which is considered a handicap for many small municipalities that do not have the means to accomplish public action. Faced with the difficulty of merging municipalities, the state has favored intercommunal cooperation at the institutional level. Here, the intermunicipal principle allows municipalities to work in groups to facilitate collaboration. The strengthening and simplification of intercommunal institutionalism develops both financial and functional solidarity between municipalities and their groups.

We have thus attempted to understand the recent reform conditions for inter-municipalities as well as the related characteristics and dynamics. This involved a particular focus on French metropolises. That is, the *Métropole*. This investigation aimed to deduce the context of the abovementioned urban strategy.

### 1. Debates on Métropole issues

This article deals with intermunicipal structures and urban cities. We attempt to describe the related political and social settings, which have undergone multiple evolutions. Previous studies have described the second tier of local government as it exists in a number of European countries. Most of these have examined countries with three subnational government levels. In the French case, this includes activities and issues related to the department. Many aspects of the 2000s reforms have been explained through their presence in local-level social policies (Négrier and Nicolas 2014). We examine inter-municipal institutions and urban policies in our analysis of lower-tier local

government.

When discussing intermunicipal reform, some argue for the development of an intermunicipal system and dynamic decentralization. Compared to the conditions of the pre-1982 system, the centralized and hierarchical political and administrative systems no longer maintain powerful influences over urban cities and policies (Pinson 2006). The intensification of administrative competences and political drives have resulted in new definitions for local structures and state designs. Some studies have also pointed out the tendency of recentralization through these reforms. As noted in another analysis of the historical evolution of urban policy (Epstein 2015), decentralization reforms reshape the central-local relationship. With the state's evolving and changing role in that relationship, the central state has continued to update its influence over cities and urban policies in addition to restructuring its hierarchy within the frame of state management (Béal and Pinson 2014). In reference to these viewpoints within the central-local relationship, we try to point to the perspective from which the state tends to recentralize urban policies.

## **2. Social and Economic Factors**

The Métropole is a new governance tool for large urban areas. Various resulting forms of cooperation and competency conflicts have led to new definitions for urban city areas. Here, we examine the social and economic factors related to recent reforms.

### **2.1 Globalization**

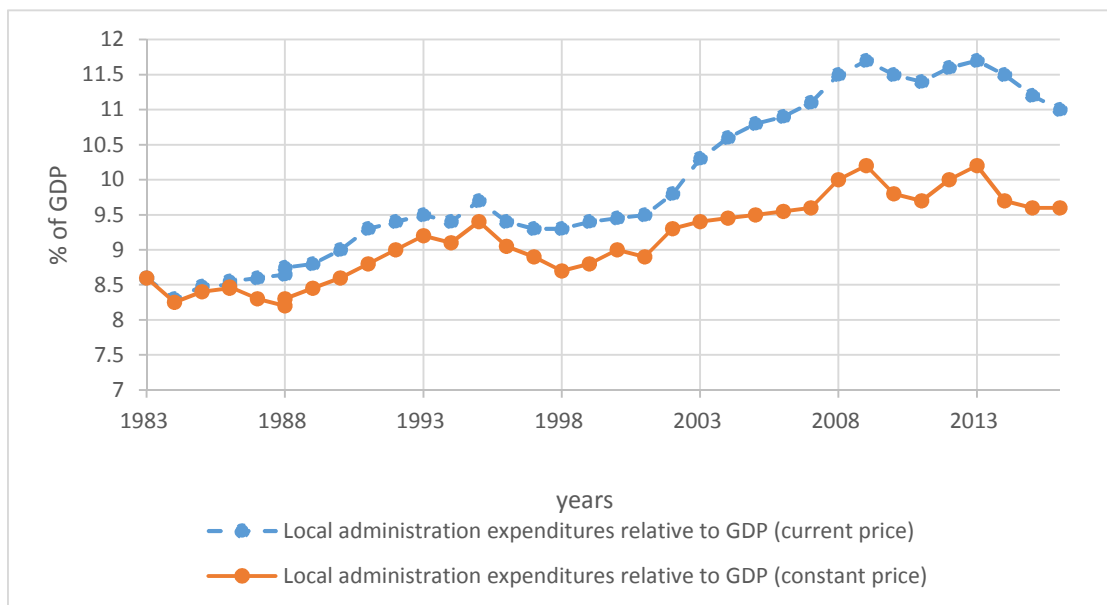
Some have argued that the rise of supply reform places demands on economic globalization, internationalization, and related political strategies (Cole and Payre 2016). We first tried to describe the reason that the intermunicipal cooperative structure was reshaped. That is, it was based on the need to reduce local and state financial deficits.

EU member states are required to follow the rules for EU fiscal discipline, which are designed to maintain public finance sustainability in the Eurozone. The EU imposes the following discipline on EU members and euro-area candidate countries: "*The budget deficit must not exceed 3 % of gross domestic product (GDP). Public debt must not exceed 60% of GDP*" (Eurostat 2019). An intergovernmental treaty was signed in March 2010 (i.e., the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union, otherwise called the "Fiscal Compact"). The Fiscal Compact obligates signatory countries to adopt these measures through national legislative measures.

Eurozone economies also fell into deep recessions along with the 2008/2009 recession. The Nicolas Sarkozy presidency (2007–2012) experienced a strong recession in 2009, which was linked to the global financial crisis of 2008. This indicated that the fiscal shock was particularly brutal. The François Hollande presidency (2012-2017) had dealt with a budget deficit while attempting to meet the 3% of GDP reference value set by the EU. The executive branch aimed to reduce the deficit by increasing taxes and contributions. The deficit surpassed 3% of GDP, a requirement that has not been respected since 2007<sup>1</sup>.

The evolution of local public finance is a major issue for national government strategies designed to control them. The annual average rate of local expenditures had accumulated +3.1% between 2010 and 2013, and a further +0.3% between 2013 and 2017. The augmentation of local government expenditures was sharp over these periods, rising from €56 billion in 1983 to €245 billion in 2016 (Cour des comptes 2018). This increase was mainly due to the successive transfer of competences to local authorities within the framework of the decentralization. These measures had been carried out since the early 1980s. However, a significant portion of these increases did not result from decentralization, but instead occurred from constant jurisdiction (Table 1)<sup>2</sup>.

Table 1. Evolution of local administration expenditures relative to GDP (current and constant prices between 1983 and 2016)

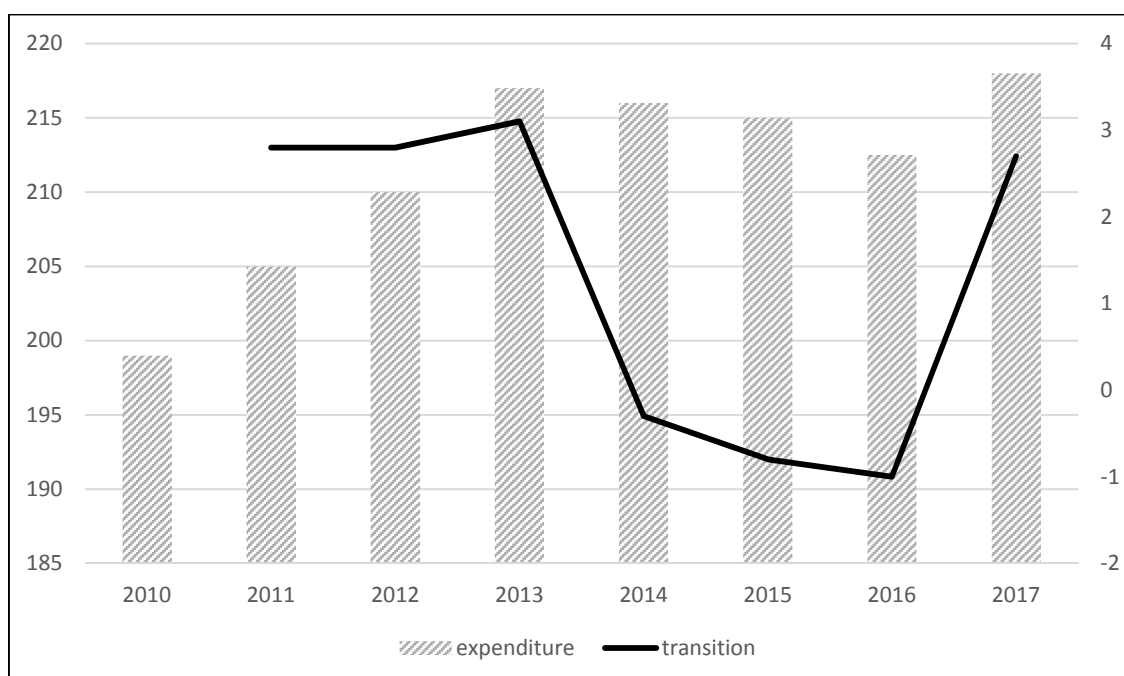


Source: *Forum de la performance* (2018)

Article 72-2 of the Constitution stipulates that the transfer or extension of competences shall be accompanied by financial compensation. Some of the background factors involved in Act III of decentralization were related to French social and economic issues, including the budget deficit, reductions in local government spending, and efficiency strategies. Municipal and intermunicipal assistance became increasingly important for public local services during this process.

Coupled with economic growth, the deficit has improved. While local public works spending has increased, local government debt has accumulated. The national government has actively sought to reform this fiscal system by introducing modern budgeting techniques. That challenge has influenced the reduction of local government spending. This problem has been also addressed through a comprehensive approach to reshaping local management systems involved in financial and administrative operations. INSEE indicates that national and local government debts reached 218.4 billion euros in 2017 (Table 2). This shows that local governments have increased their public debts (INSEE 2018). Local public debt has continued to grow, but at a slower pace.

Table 2. Annual local government expenditures (2010-2017)



Source: *Cour des comptes* (2018). p.73

The central government has aimed to clarify competencies to reduce local government expenditure overlaps. The intermunicipal cooperation system has also been reshaped. These reforms facilitate municipalities in intermunicipal cooperatives of certain sizes, which are dispersed across multiple institutions. These would appreciate more operational efficiency in the financial and administrative management duties of local governments.

## 2.2 Cross-border interurban competition

Economic globalization imposes international competition on cities. Urban policy strategies consist of economic development policies throughout the country. Particularly for urban cities, intermunicipal cooperative reforms establish the structures of local economic development organizations (Cole 2012). In addition, the Hollande government wanted to show its capabilities both domestically and within the EU to prove its efficacy in carrying out reforms<sup>3</sup>.

The European effects have urged intermunicipal cooperation. Urban development is a major issue for the economic, social, and territorial cohesion policies of the EU. The EU provides funding for projects and programs that cover urban and regional development. In particular, European Regional Development fund aims to strengthen economic and social cohesion within the EU at the city level. This is done by favoring sustainable urban development. Several urban cities are currently undertaking urban projects for economic prosperity in a variety of countries. In relation to EU funding and the need to survive cross-border interurban competition, French urban policy has also intentionally collected competencies among regions and urban cities to gain additional economic development power. This is designed to create an intermunicipal operational organization that can effectively obtain EU funds. Interurban competition has accelerated in this context.

Fueled by neoliberalism, this results in urban policy transformations and places the impact of the theoretical tool of neoliberalism on cities. In the French case, some have concluded that the theoretical framework of neoliberalism is incomplete. It is particularly unconvincing for use in local-level fiscal policies and social services (Pinson and Journel 2018).

### **3. Decentralization reforms and urban policy development**

The evolution of the intermunicipal system has strengthened municipal function and legitimacy since the 1990s. The intent was to pursue intermunicipal cooperation and focus on shaping the territorial system to encourage development, reduction, and the creation of intermunicipal institutions. We have thus tried to reveal different viewpoints to this evolutionary process. This includes those of the evolution of intermunicipal cooperation and aspects related to the Métropole.

#### **3.1 The French trajectory of intermunicipal cooperation under decentralization reforms**

Despite the situational reality for local governments, the website for the Minister of the Interior states that France has become a deconcentrated and decentralized state<sup>4</sup>. Article 1 of the Constitution outlines that “the organization of the Republic is decentralized.” This is also enshrined in Article 72 in regard to the notion of “free administration.”

Law No. 82-213 from March 2, 1982 states that, “on the rights and freedoms of municipalities, departments and regions,” the so-called “decentralization” law (reformed by former Minister of the Interior Gaston Defferre) is the first part of a series of legislative texts organizing a profound reform of French territorial organization. This also enshrined the status of local authorities.

A dynamic intermunicipal structure has developed through the successive movements of decentralization. Many have pointed out that French local governments contain many layers and are thus fragmented (so-called “mille-feuilles”). Many small municipalities have management difficulties in the absence of other subnational layers and the state (Duran and Thoenig 1996). Less than 2% of all municipalities contain more than 20,000 inhabitants (Table 3). Among the possible solutions, priority should be given to those related to size, geographical location, and population. This also depends on the relationship with other local government levels and the state itself. Small rural municipalities are closely linked to the department, region, and state authorities at the local level.

There have been several attempts to remedy communal fragmentation by grouping municipalities to form better-armed communities that can exercise their powers. The law of July 16, 1971 (known as the “Marcellin law”) tended to systematically promote the merger of municipalities through regrouping. However, this was met with

opposition by elected officials. Municipalities thus had difficulty accepting the proposition. The controversial law left a traumatic memory among both elected officials and administrators. As early as 1976, *Guichard* reported that institutional territories and local government systems were incompatible with economic growth and social development throughout the country.

Table 3. Distribution of municipalities and populations (2015)

People	Number of municipalities	Percentage of municipalities	Percentage of population
<200	8,894	25.2%	1.6%
200 - 500	9,823	27.8%	4.8%
500 - 2,000	11,320	32.0%	16.7%
2,000 - 5,000	3,153	8.9%	14.6%
5,000 - 10,000	1,173	3.3%	12.2%
10,000 - 20,000	532	1.5%	11.0%
20,000 - 50,000	337	1.0%	15.5%
50,000 - 100,000	83	0.2%	8.3%
>100,000	42	0.1%	15.2%

Source: Direction générale des collectivités locales.(2018) *Les collectivités locales en chiffres 2018*. p.8.

Following its previous failure to merge municipalities, the government desperately switched to a technical plan of intercommunal cooperation. In order to adequately distribute public local services at the municipal level while benefitting from economies of scale, municipalities have sought a form of relatively flexible or “associative” intercommunal cooperation. This meant EPCI of voluntary intercommunal syndicates. That EPCI was the only way to maintain the fragmented municipality form. At that time, that had not contained their own tax systems. The institutional forms related to intermunicipal cooperation have been widely used based on the law of March, 22 1890. Municipalities use various task-specific institutions: single-purpose intermunicipal syndicates (*syndicats à vocation unique-SIVU*), pluri-purpose syndicates (*syndicats à vocation multiple- SIVOM*) and mixed syndicate (*syndicat mixte*).

Many regional-level cities faced challenges due to rapid urbanization in the 1960s. On the 1966 law, new form of EPCIs were created and equipped with their own



tax systems, while urban communities (*Communauté Urbaines*) were established within regional metropolises in the 1960s. This also encouraged the state to balance development across the country while dealing with extreme population concentrations and advanced urban functions in Paris. Institutional reforms were thus carried out.

EPCI has developed their own tax systems to enrich their resources and authority. Intermunicipal cooperation was established by the law of 1983 (loi n° 83-636 du 13 juillet 1983 portant modification du statut des agglomérations nouvelles), the *ATR* law (loi n° 92-125 du 6 février 1992 relative à l'administration territoriale de la République), and the *Chevènement* law (loi no 99-586 du 12 juillet 1999 relative au renforcement et à la simplification de la coopération intercommunale), which instituted a redesign of basic local government units at the municipal level.

A system of intermunicipal cooperation was chosen to confront difficulties with communal mergers. This system has negotiated several challenges corresponding to the realities of local, national, and international affairs, which vary with the times. Intercommunal cooperation reform is adopted as an institutional solution for phenomenon of urbanism (Négrier 2005).

The council of each EPCI with their own tax system is governed by its councilmembers. These individuals are the municipal councilors of each intermunicipal cooperative authority. They are elected from among municipal councilmembers, and have thus been criticized for lacking direct legitimacy (i.e., the democratic deficit) (Hoffmann-Martinot 2003). As such, a new voting method called “fléchage” was introduced by amendment <sup>5</sup>. This strengthened the legitimacy of intermunicipal authorities. Intermunicipal councilmembers have also been elected by direct universal suffrage since 2014.

### 3.2 Continuity of intermunicipal reform

Through changes in the parliamentary majority, the decentralization reforms instituted during the Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande presidencies can be seen as a continuity of core issues. Apart from worries over results and resources, the third wave of decentralization (called “Act III”) reforms allowed cities to transfer functions and competences through a majority not from the state, but at the local level.

In the context of decentralization since the 2000's, it has not been a major objective to transfer administrative authority and function from the state to local governments. A new decentralization law was implemented during the Sarkozy presidency (the law of December 16, 2010 for the reform of local government). It aimed

to increase local government efficiency while reducing overlapping competencies, functions, and resources among the three subnational levels. It also aimed to clarify the responsibilities given to each local level. It stipulated that each municipality must participate in an EPCI and establish new forms of intermunicipal cooperation. The Métropole was also aimed for urban cities in 2010.

Although this was already created by the 2010 law, Hollande's reforms were designed to establish and conduct new urban policies (Caillosse 2016). The decentralization reforms also promoted the reconfiguration of local government competences with the principle of clarifying them and their functions. The reforms focused on rational postures, functions, and resources for local government systems. The leading piece of legislation was the law of January 27, 2014, which concerned the modernization of territorial public action and affirmed métropolises (LOI n° 2014-58 du 27 janvier 2014 de modernisation de l'action publique territoriale et d'affirmation des Métropoles - MAPTAM). It was designed to transfer functions among local government levels, promote and reorganize a cooperative framework among local governments, and adjust complicated local finance systems. It also dealt with the affirmation and creation of Métropolises. As such, the law of January 16, 2015 (loi n° 2015-29 du 16 janvier 2015 relative à la délimitation des régions, aux élections régionales et départementales et modifiant le calendrier électoral) delimited the number of regions from 22 to 13, which was connected to metropolitan areas. The law of August 7, 2015 was then passed to ensure the new territorial organization of the Republic (LOI n° 2015-991 du 7 août 2015 portant nouvelle organisation territoriale de la République -NOTRe ). It thus outlined a principle specialization plan for the competences and functions of each local government and dealt with the distribution and clarification of authority. EPCIs have been transformed since the adoption of territorial reforms in the 2010s (Table 4).

The Métropole institution was reinforced as an urban development policy during the Hollande presidency. At that time, laws were established to ease the requirements for installing the Métropole. These competences were reinforced in multiple fields (e.g., economic development, housing environment, roads, and social action) based on agreement with the departments in which Métropole cities were situated. They now have substantial power in some areas, such as social housing (Cole 2017).

It is essentially mandatory to comply with habitancy requirements to become a Métropole city (i.e., more than 400,000 inhabitants in an urban area or more than 650,000 total inhabitants). On the other hand, it is also a voluntary process for cities with more than 400,000 inhabitants within an urban area of 650,000, a regional capital

city, or in central city areas with employment zones of more than 400,000 inhabitants. At the time of its creation, an agglomerated community must consist of more than 50,000 inhabitants or an urban unit of more than 15,000; an urban community that consists of several municipalities and does not contain an enclave must have more than 250,000 inhabitants.

Table 4. Intermunicipalities in 2019

EPCI (with own tax system)	number of inter-municipality groups	number of grouped municipalities
Métropolises (Métropoles): The law of December 16, 2010 (modified by the law of January 27, 2014) and the law of February 28, 2017 (including Paris and Aix-Marseille-Provence)	21	904
Urban communities (communautés urbaines): The law of December 31, 1966	13	589
Local Agglomeration Community (communautés d'agglomération): The law of July 12, 1999	223	7,488
Communities of municipalities (communautés de communes): The law of February 6, 1992	1,001	25,926
<b>EPCI total</b>	<b>1,258</b>	<b>34,966</b>
metropolis of Lyon	1	59

Source: Collectivites-locales.gouv.fr. (2019) *Bilan statistique 2019*

The three cities of Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles have functioned as designated cities in the past. The Métropole of Lyon adopted its new framework on January 1, 2015. It was chosen to become a territorial authority with special status as its own local government entity rather than an intermunicipal association. This qualified it as a “community with special status.” It was thus equipped with both metropolitan and departmental competences. The Métropoles of Grand Paris and Aix-Marseille-Provence were later given individual administrative systems on January 1, 2016.

Another 12 cities were granted Métropole status on January 1, 2015. Bordeaux, Brest, Grenoble, Lille, Montpellier, Nantes, Rennes, Rouen, Strasbourg, and Toulouse were automatically transformed. Nancy joined on July 1, 2016. In addition, the law of February 28, 2017 regarding the status of Paris and its metropolitan planning (loi relative au statut de Paris et à l'aménagement métropolitain du 28 février 2017) provided additional possibilities to transform the Métropole. Seven new cities were added to the Métropole on January 1, 2018 (i.e., Metz, Orleans, Tours-Val-de-Loire, Dijon, Clermont-Auvergne, Sain-Etienne and Toulon-Provence-Mediterranean)<sup>6</sup>.

### 3.3 Institutional purposes of the Métropole under French urban policy

These reforms were essentially designed to modify overlapping responsibilities and clarify community missions to avoid redundant competencies. However, the Métropole has strengthened and focused on urban economic growth and development across France. The MAPTAM law stipulated a transfer of functions and resources related to economic development, urban planning, tourism, and environmental strategy from member municipalities to the intermunicipal cooperative structure, the Métropole, communities of municipalities, and the agglomerated communities. The NOTRe law stipulated the mandatory transfer of municipal competences related to water and sanitation to public institutions. This also regarded the issue of urban planning. For instance, the Métropole (not the intermunicipal cooperatives) was given duties related to upgrading transportation infrastructure in urban areas. As such, the Métropole aims to enhance metropolitan economic function throughout the country.

Some competencies were transferred on a mandatory basis, while others were based on agreement among concerned authorities. The Métropole sends requests to municipalities. If an agreement could not be reached, competencies were automatically transferred to the Métropole in 2017<sup>7</sup>. The Métropole has collected various competencies from the municipalities, departments, regions, and even the state (Table 5)<sup>8</sup>.

Table 5. Transfer of competencies to the Métropole

Municipality	Métropole	Department	Region	National Government
—————>	Promoting local areas abroad	←—————		
—————>	Economic development	←-----	-----	
—————>	Competences of tourism	←-----		
—————>	Cultural and sports facilities of metropolitan interest	←-----		
—————>	The Coherent Territorial Planning Schemes (SCOT) , local urban development plan (PLU), Concerted Development Areas (ZAC)			
—————>	Support and assistance for higher education, research institutions, and research programs Construction and maintenance of public junior and high schools			
	Construction and maintenance of public junior and high schools	←-----		
	Equipment for and operation of public junior high and high schools	←-----	-----	
—————>	Management of classified roads in the public domain, departmental road and road services in metropolitan areas	←—————		
—————>	Local housing program (PLH), housing policy, and tourism policy	←—————		
	Housing solidarity fund (FSL)	←—————		
	Housing policy (brick-and-mortar aid), enforceable right to housing (DALO), assistance and servicing of housing and accommodation policy for disadvantaged people	←-----	-----	
—————>	Social and economic integration to prevent delinquencies			
	Departmental integration program (PDI), departmental social action service and services for youths facing difficulties	←—————		
	Policies for the elderly, social and family integration of youths and families facing difficulties, social assistance for children (ASE)	←-----		
—————>	Sanitation and water, cemetery, Department of Fire and Rescue Services (SDIS)			
	Construction for university students	←----- on demand	-----	

—————> Transfer within a prescribed time limit

-----> Transfer within the convention through discussion

Source: Liberation.fr. *L'EuroMétropole va devoir arracher ses nouvelles compétences au Bas-Rhin*, 06/01/2015

The national governmental attitude was evident from the very beginning of this discussion in 2010 based on the Ministry of Interior website, which clearly indicated the Métropole's purpose as a space for transferring skills from departments and regions (e.g., economic development, transportation, and education) so that the state could entrust them with major equipment and infrastructure<sup>9</sup>. Under Hollande's administration in 2016, Prime Minister Manuel Valls's website stated that the Métropolis was to delegate areas by convention of department, region, and state<sup>10</sup>.

As previously noted, these reforms set population size as the fundamental indicator for creating intermunicipal cooperatives. If certain conditions were met (on a mandatory basis or not), they shifted toward the form of urban areas as part of the Métropole. It has increased the number of opportunities for these entities to integrate with the Métropole.

State grants has also become a contributor for the municipalities to participate in the Métropole. The Métropole has also raised another financial competition issue. Although the urban competencies in cities have been enhanced, some have criticized the insufficient transfer of tax revenue. On the other hand, if cities can become part of the Métropole, it is prepared to finance state grants for them. It is now more concerned than ever about the possible side effect of cities near the Métropole losing their influence over metropolitan areas. Some agglomerated cities cannot become part of the Métropole. These have anticipated the risk of losing influence<sup>11</sup>.

#### **4. Negotiating the transfer of one's authorities to others**

Local level political systems have also historically been characterized by several fragmentations. Each local/national linkage has established its own accommodation capacity. The tributary political system has resulted in significant difficulties within the center-periphery division of political power and influence.

##### **4.1 Political competition**

These complexities have also produced political competition among locally and nationally elected officials. First, this involves the practice of accumulated elected office (i.e., *cumul des mandate* (multiple office-holding)). In 2012, there were 476 of 577 deputies (82%), with 267 of 348 (77%) in cumulative local executive situations<sup>12</sup>. The *Liberation* newspaper reported that there were 175 deputies who were also mayors in January 2017 (30% of the contingent), including 93 at Les Républicains (about half of

their parliamentary group), while 51 were socialists (18% of them)<sup>13</sup>. This culture has produced French localism. These officials connect local interests with national political power and influence (and vice versa) (Hoffmann-Martinot 2003).

The Senate also represents local interests. For instance, senators can accumulate local councilors. The state of the electoral system has resulted in most senators representing rural areas with thinly populated towns and departments. They mobilize political resources by representing small-town and rural interests. Most senators are also councilors for these areas; they are the defenders of municipalities and departments.

Second, multiple associations exist so that local executives have associations at each layer of the local government (e.g., Association des maires de France (AMF), Association des maires ruraux de France (AMRF), France Urbain, Régions de France, Villes de France, and France Urbaine). Local executives participate in their respective associations. They represent and defend organizational interests at each level with national and European authority. These associations are committed to ensuring that their power is guaranteed by the state and other local government levels. Their lobbying process is sometimes organized to result in competition.

Third, the majority of seats at each local government layer are different. These differences create difficulty in adjustment procedures among local governments and the state. A laundry list of topics is sensible at both the national and local levels in the absence of agreement between these two parties.

Leftist forces gained a majority of seats at the local level during the early stages of François Hollande's presidency. The left wing then won an absolute majority in the 2012 National Assembly elections. However, the president's socialist party and left-wing entities continued to lose elections at the local and national levels. The right has controlled the senate since 2014. Although it held a majority after the 2008 municipal elections, the left lost in the municipal elections of 2014. The conservative UMP Party won the departmental elections in 2015. The right wing has held most political stances at regional councils since 2015. The right-wing senate and left-wing assembly reached a national-level agreement during Hollande's tenure, thus strengthening new large regions and the inter-municipalities. Their compromise allowed negotiations on the terms and conditions for municipalities to possibly oppose the transfer of authority from municipalities to the intercommunal level.

## 4.2 The complexity of the decision–making process

The transfer of authority to other local levels is a sensitive area. This includes the transfer of Departmental authority to the Métropoles, municipal power to the communities of communes, and communal power to the communities of agglomeration. Lobbyists for each assert their own right based on the principle of 'free administration' and their proximity to local citizens. Local governments have not been unified. They strategize to gain authority or protest and remain strong within their territories. The government has made it clear that they will continue to keep their own powers.

As defenders at the communal level, rural mayors who are angered by EPCIs deliver proposals. Until the election-reform law 2014, there were 261 deputies (45%) and 166 senators (48%) in cumulative local executive situation: mayors, Presidents of the Departmental Council and Presidents of the Regional Council<sup>14</sup>. Rural mayors were also included. The AMRF expressed outright displeasure based on the NOTRe law, which mechanically decreased representativeness among small municipalities. Rural mayors also expressed their discontent. The AMRF also denounced several aspects of the laws passed under François Hollande's government<sup>15</sup>. The rural mayors won a concession in some areas. Their compromise allowed negotiations on the terms and conditions for municipalities to possibly oppose the transfer of authority from municipalities to the intercommunal level. On the other hand, France Urban (a merger of associations within major French cities (AMGVF) and urban communities (Acuf)) have also advocated for a series of reforms<sup>16</sup>. They succeeded to collect competencies in the field of economic development from other local government levels.

The association of rural municipalities put pressure on the government to deliberate over a law that would program and finance them. In 2018, the president of the AMRF contested this transfer; the group also warned that this transfer should not be made mandatory, particularly for competencies related to water and sanitation<sup>17</sup>. Articles 64 and 66 of Law No. 2015-991 of August 7, 2015 (in the NOTRe law) laid down the fundamental principles for the transfer of water and sanitation competencies to the communities of the communes, the agglomerated communities, and the Métropole. However, the government reversed this provision with the law of August 3, 2018. The transfer has thus been postponed until January 1, 2026 and will be made under specific conditions<sup>18</sup>.

A set of reforms has also continued to cut departmental authority. Departments have raised strong objections to the arguments promoting their abolishment. They still intend to look for opportunities to survive, especially in the field of departmental social



action. Departmental political executives claim their advantage at the point corresponding to territorial solidarity and local identity. They assert that several local services should be retained on the basis of performance and for equal access to community inhabitants. They wish to fulfill, rebalance, and redistribute public services throughout the departments not only for urban areas, but also for rural residents<sup>19</sup>. The Manuel Valls government (2014-2016) discussed whether the departmental system should be abolished. The ADF (Assemblée des départements de France - Assembly of French Departments) was against the territorial reform project, which was promoted by the socialist president. The left lost its senate majority. While its solidarity was weakened within the National Assembly, the government was forced to listen to suggestions from departmentally elected officials who held multiple offices<sup>20</sup>. The ADF later organized a symposium in Paris in 2018. There, they emphasized their grievances about proposed legislation that would establish a merger of the metropolises and departments in five major cities (i.e., Bordeaux, Lille, Nantes, Nice, and Toulouse). Although several departmental presidents said they were ready to merge their departments (e.g., Bas-Rhin (The Republicans), Haut-Rhin (Divers droite), Nantes (PS), and Lille (center right)) and would accommodate the project, there were also departments that refused to participate (e.g., Gironde (PS), Toulouse, Nice (The Republicans), and Bordeaux (The Republicans))<sup>21</sup>.

Depending on the regional circumstances and levels of partisanship between departments and urban communities, it was also difficult to reach agreements about the transfer of competencies from the departments to the municipalities as well as those from the municipalities to intermunicipal cooperatives and metropolises. On the other hand, repeated failures to merge departments and an intractable municipal fragmentation led the central government to strengthen the form of intermunicipal cooperation for the future absorption of departments and the reduction of EPCIs for rural municipalities. In effect, some departmental councilors have a lot of debate about a merger of the metropolises and departments. Rural mayors also expressed discontent after a merger involving two-thirds of the EPCIs (provoked by the NOTRe law, which mechanically decreased representativeness among small communes).

## **Conclusion**

The reforms of the 2010s resulted in many issues for the central government, including social and economic affairs at home and abroad. It was required to accommodate EU requests, surmount a financial deficit, and win out in international

economic competition. Urban communities were thus strengthened and formed an infrastructure for economic development at the local level.

The central government promoted the creation of urban spheres to ease restrictions on population requirements. The issues have been rearranged to focus on one certain artificial area following the mandatory population requirements rather than any sphere of life. That is, the central government outlines the rules and priorities within the system. Local governments must broadly be in line with central government policies. Rules come from the national level, not the local (Caillosse 2016).

On the other hand, if these territorial reforms were established by the central government, it is assumed that local actors have attempted to tease out a few compromises. Multiple mandate actors coordinate these actions. These central-local political competitions result in metropolitan urban policies that spur collective action and compromise based on practical methods.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the statistics institute (INSEE), the public deficit fell by 0.8 points last year. It thus stood at 2.6% of the total GDP in 2017. This occurred in the context of strong growth (2%), meaning higher tax revenues. INSEE (2017) En 2017, le déficit public s'élève à 2,6 % du PIB, la dette notifiée à 97,0% du PIB. *Informations Rapides*.

<sup>2</sup> There was a profound change in the composition of local public expenditures when decentralization began. This meant an increase in operating expenses, particularly those related to staffing costs (Forum de la performance 2018).

<sup>3</sup> L'express (2015) *Alsace-Champagne-Ardenne-Lorraine: petite histoire d'une grande fusion*.

<sup>4</sup> Vie-publique.fr (2018) *Qu'est-ce que la décentralisation ?* le 30 juin 2018.

<sup>5</sup> "Fléchage" is a type of voting method in which the councilors of member municipalities and communautés are elected on the same ballot (half of the candidates receiving the most votes are typically sitting on the council of the member municipality and the conseil communautaire) (Wollmann, Hellmut 2010: 288).

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<sup>10</sup> Gouvernement.fr (2017) *metropolises*

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<sup>21</sup> France Bleu Bourgogne (2019) *Le transfert de compétences à la Métropole de Dijon tourne à la guerre politique entre deux ex-ministres.*