

1. A Comparative Analysis of Amalgamation Reforms in Selected European Countries

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1.1 Introduction

Various European countries have implemented amalgamation reforms since World War II, and such reforms are still or again on the agenda of national and subnational governments. Politicians consider them a remedy to improve public service delivery and the financial situation of local and superordinate tiers of government, particularly in times of financial stress: Greece serves as a good example for this strategy, as it tremendously reduced its number of municipalities in 2010.

Although the advantages and disadvantages of amalgamations have been widely discussed, studies on the spread and outcome of this type of reform are mostly country specific, fragmented and only partially comparable (for example, Keating 1995; Council of Europe 2001; Fox and Gurley 2006).

Based on an expert survey, this chapter provides a comparative overview of the amalgamation strategies in local government in continental European countries, the implementation of these projects, patterns of conflict and the outcome of these reforms. The main research question concerns whether the amalgamation reforms have achieved their goals thus far and whether the selection of a specific reform strategy leads to a certain reform path and outcome.

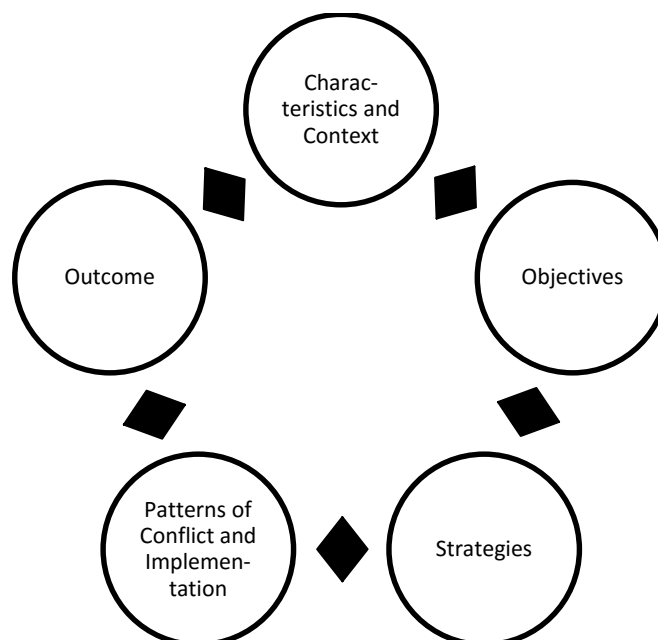
The chapter starts with the development of a framework, which structures the analysis of amalgamation reforms, and then provides an overview of the development of the local territorial structure in Europe and a classification of amalgamation strategies. We subsequently discuss the objectives of amalgamations, the patterns of conflict, and the outcome of the reform.

For this comparative cross-national study, we collected data from an expert survey that was sent to academic experts specialized in local government research in 20 countries participating in the working group on territorial restructuring of the LocRef COST Action research network, which include the majority of the continental European countries and Iceland. The questionnaire on territorial reforms focused, in the first part, on statistical data regarding municipal structure and size. In the second part, territorial reforms, particularly amalgamations, were addressed. The data were collected in 2014, and the response rate was 75% (15 countries participated in this survey: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland).

1.2 Framework for the Analysis of Amalgamation Reforms

The analysis of amalgamations in European countries is structured based on an analytical framework, as presented in figure 1.1: amalgamations are first classified by the *characteristics* of the not-yet-amalgamated municipalities and the *context* that influences the *objectives* that actors want to reach with the reform. These objectives are expected to be achieved through the selection of a *reform strategy* and its *implementation*. The implementation will cause *patterns of conflicts*, which, among other factors, will influence the *outcome* of the reform. The reform process is nonlinear. The outcome will be the starting point of future reforms, and each aspect of the process may influence other aspects, e.g., patterns of conflict can trigger a change in the strategy or implementation process.

Figure 1.1: Analytical Framework



This article focuses on the “objectives”, “strategies”, “patterns of conflict” and “outcome” of amalgamation reforms. The contribution by Askim et al. in this volume discusses the drivers, i.e., characteristics and context, of such reforms.

Objectives

The objectives that politicians want to achieve with amalgamations focus on not only the resources of a municipality (human resources and local finances) and the output of amalgamation (quality and quantity of public services, correctness of legal decisions) but also the room for maneuvering that is granted to an amalgamated municipality (from

outside the political-administrative system of the municipality, local autonomy; from inside the political-administrative system, local democracy and identity with a municipality).

These effects are frequently discussed in the literature and are crucial characteristics of local government performance (see Poister 2003; Padovani and Scorsone 2009).

Proponents usually argue that task fulfillment could be improved (Reingewertz 2012; Steiner 2002) and that costs can be reduced through economies of scale (Fox and Gurley 2006; Council of Europe 2001). Professionalization of the administration is expected in larger municipalities because personnel are better educated and able to work in more specialized areas (Dafflon 1998). The position of the local tier of government vis-à-vis higher tiers is expected to become stronger because more tasks can be transferred to the local tier and because the local tier can gain more negotiation power; moreover, the local government should gain more municipal autonomy (Steiner 2002). However, opponents of mergers often argue that democracy will be hindered by a reduction in political participation and direct contact between local councilors and citizens and by a loss in local identity (Linder 1999; Copus 2006; De Ceuninck et al. 2010).

In addition, if promoters of amalgamations formulate objectives, they are not necessarily consistent and clear. Indeed, because of political reasons, a lack of knowledge or conflicting interests, governments may follow an inconsistent agenda with contradictory objectives.

Strategies

Countries can choose between different reform strategies. In a first dimension, these strategies can range from bottom-up to top-down strategies, and in a second dimension, they can range from comprehensive to incremental approaches. A bottom-up amalgamation strategy can be defined as a proposal for boundary change that is generated at the local tier of government. These reforms are usually voluntary—that is, the municipalities and its citizens decide on their own whether they want to merge with one or more neighbor municipalities. There are no threats of intervention or law enforcement at the superior state level in case the merger project fails. In some cases, superordinate tiers of government may set financial incentives to promote mergers. In contrast, a top-down amalgamation strategy involves an intervention by central government (or by the superior state level), and changes are imposed on local governments (Baldersheim/Rose 2010: 13). Top-down mergers are usually coercive—that is, the higher-ranking state level can force a municipality to merge with one or more neighbor municipalities against the will of the municipality concerned or the majority of its citizens.

With respect to the second dimension, comprehensive and incremental approaches can be distinguished (Baldersheim/Rose 2010: 13). When a comprehensive strategy

is chosen, the entire local government structure in the country is analyzed at one point in time. Such an approach can be considered a conceptual and normative approach. In the incremental approach, however, only parts of a territorial structure in a country are considered for reform; the procedure may be stepwise (Kaiser 2015; see also the chapter by Broekema/Steen in this volume for a qualitative perspective on comprehensive and incremental amalgamation strategies).

Patterns of Conflict and Implementation

The chosen strategy will likely cause different patterns of conflict during the implementation process. A top-down initiated reform is likely to meet resistance at the local level (Brantgärde 1974) and to cause conflicts between central and local government, large and small municipalities and further and rich and poor municipalities, as a top-down initiative by the government can easily be considered domination by the central government or a conflict between larger and richer municipalities against smaller and poorer ones. The latter municipalities may indeed consider themselves victims of such reforms.

The same may be true with comprehensive reforms. Such reforms will likely cause a greater number of conflicts because they have an impact on all the smaller and poorer municipalities. Thus, resistance to amalgamations may be reduced if the reforms are introduced bottom-up and incrementally.

Not only the chosen strategy but also the objectives may influence whether resistance will arise. Certain reform objectives, such as increasing efficiency, may cause greater skepticism by the citizens. The impact can take time to actualize, and the expected effects are sometimes difficult to calculate *ex ante*. Additionally, such objectives may be questioned because other aspects related to a municipality, such as responsiveness and local democracy, are considered more important and endangered. However, objectives such as resolving the financial problems of a municipality would be easier to justify beforehand and would therefore likely face less resistance. Providing concrete knowledge of the tasks that are being transferred from the superordinate tier to the local tier of government could also engender a more positive attitude toward a reform.

Reforms are usually associated with the initiative of political parties in power. Hence, conflicts may be visible between left- and right-wing parties.

During the implementation process, different problems can arise. There may be opposition from not only politicians but also employees, and the potentially different views and approaches of a rather technocratic administration or a government and parliament in political argument could cause resistance to change. Both groups could be winners or losers of the reform, and the outcome may be affected.

Additionally, the reform process may lack thorough preparation, or resources may be lacking for a timely proceeding. If other reform projects are occurring at the same time, these issues could create conflicts between the different reforms.

Outcome

The outcome of an amalgamation reform is the consequence of the chosen reform strategy, patterns of conflict and the way conflicts are handled, as well as factors that cannot be influenced by the involved actors, such as a decrease in tax revenues in times of recession. From the viewpoint of the promoters of the reform, the one-to-one achievement of all reform objectives is the expected result. From a more objective outside view, outcomes different from the expected ones may still lead to a municipality with greater legitimacy regarding the input and output. Without valuing the outcome, we want to examine the realized results of amalgamations.

1.3 Development of the Municipal Structure and Amalgamation Strategies

The majority of the 15 observed continental European countries have reduced their number of municipalities during the past 40 years. The most drastic up-scaling between 1973 and 2013 occurred in Greece and Belgium, at -94.6 and -75.0 percent, respectively. In addition, Iceland, Denmark and the Netherlands lost more than half of their municipalities during this time period. By contrast, in Slovenia, the number of municipalities increased between 1993 and 2013, from 147 to 212 units. Additionally, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Italy saw a slight increase in the number of municipalities since the 1970s.

Table 1.1 presents the mean population size of the municipalities in the 15 observed European countries. The largest municipalities can be found in Northern Europe, where amalgamations took place in most countries.

Denmark and the Netherlands have the largest municipalities, and Portugal, Greece and Sweden follow, with a mean population size of more than 30,000 inhabitants each. Switzerland, Iceland, Spain, Germany and Italy have the smallest municipalities, where municipalities have less than 10,000 inhabitants on average.

Iceland and Switzerland with their small municipalities demonstrate that the historical context and the density of the population in the municipality play a crucial role: although amalgamations took place, the municipalities have remained quite small. However, Portugal with its rather large municipalities has not seen mergers thus far.

Table 1.1: Development of the number of municipalities during the past 40 years¹

Country	1973	1993	2013	Change 1973-2013 in %	Mean Population
Northern Europe					
Norway	443	439	428	-3.4	11,802
Finland	483	455	320	-33.7	16,151
Sweden	464	286	290	-37.5	33,240
Denmark	275	275	98	-64.4	56,943
Iceland	224	196	74	-67.0	4,447
Western Europe					
Switzerland ²	3,095	3,015	2,396	-22.6	3,163
Germany	15,009	16,043	11,197	-25.4	6,742
The Netherlands ³	913	636	408	-55.3	41,000
Belgium	2,359	589	589	-75.0	18,593
Southern Europe					
Slovenia ⁴	-	147	212	+44.2	10,000
Portugal	304	305	308	+1.3	34,293
Spain		8,088	8,117	+0.8	5,815
Italy ⁵	8,056	8,100	8,092	+0.4	7,550
Greece	6,061	5,921	325	-94.6	33,653
Eastern Europe					
Poland	2,366	2,462	2,480	+4.8	15,600
Total (mean)	3,081	3,130	2,336	-29.3	19,933

If we classify the amalgamation strategies of the countries, we can distinguish, as already discussed, between those countries that have conducted amalgamations and those that have not thus far. The countries with an amalgamation strategy can be subdivided into countries with top-down and bottom-up approaches. A top-down approach can be comprehensive or incremental. Furthermore, mixed strategies as they exist in federal countries have to be considered. Countries without amalgamations may be subdivided into those with no amalgamation strategy (favoring intermunicipal co-operation) and those with a fragmentation strategy. Table 1.2 illustrates how the countries can be grouped into these different categories.

¹ Composition of geographical regions according to the United Nations Statistics Division.

² In 1960, 1980, 1993, 2003 and 2013.

³ In 1970, 1980, 1995, 2003 and 2013.

⁴ In 1995, 2003 and 2013.

⁵ In 1971, 1981, 1991, 2001 and 2011—that is, the years when the Central Statistics Office conduct a census.

Table 1.2: *Typology of Amalgamation Strategies*

Amalgamation Strategy	Countries
Top-down strategy (comprehensive)	Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands
Top-down strategy (incremental)	Spain, Norway
Mixed strategy	Belgium, Germany (some Länder), Switzerland (some cantons)
Bottom-up strategy	Switzerland (some cantons)
No amalgamation strategy	Germany (some Länder), Italy, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland (some cantons)
Fragmentation strategy	Poland, Slovenia

Looking at the time period since the 1970s, countries with a *comprehensive top-down* amalgamation strategy include Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland and the Netherlands, although the Danish reform had some voluntary aspects in the choice of partners and the reform in Iceland was voluntary in the sense that no amalgamation could be implemented without the acceptance of the citizens in a referendum. Additional countries with a top-down strategy, though incremental, are Norway and Spain. With these top-down reforms, the number of municipalities was often reduced drastically, such as the territorial consolidation in Greece (Hlepas 2010) or the structural reforms in Denmark (Vrangboek 2010).

Mixed strategies are found, for example, in Belgium and some German Länder, where this strategy has also been called the ‘carrot and stick’ strategy. In the first voluntary phase, municipalities could decide themselves how to implement the reform scheme. Amalgamation intentions were also supported by financial incentives (the ‘carrots’). In the second phase, however, for the local governments that failed to implement the reform scheme before a date fixed by legislation, binding legislation came into force (the ‘stick’). Very few Swiss cantons have chosen a similar strategy (e.g., Thurgau). Additionally, the East German Länder, with the exception of Sachsen, after 1990 (after the German unification), followed the same reform path (Wollmann 2010).

Some Swiss cantons apply an incremental *bottom-up* strategy for mergers. The cantonal governments support mergers with certain incentives, but they wait for the initiative of the local government.

No amalgamation strategies as such can be found in some German Länder, Italy, Portugal, Sweden and some Swiss cantons. Intermunicipal co-operation is usually widely spread in these countries to overcome the problem of minimum size. Sweden had two waves of enforced mergers in the 1950s and between 1964 and 1974; since then, the number of municipalities has remained constant. Therefore, stability may

also be an indication that amalgamation waves occurred during earlier times.

Territorial *fragmentation* has been a reform trend in several, mainly Eastern European countries, such as Slovenia and Poland (Swianiewicz 2010). Fragmentation is often a reaction to earlier consolidation reforms by communist regimes. The Czech Republic—although not part of the country sample in this chapter—serves as a good example. After a territorial consolidation of local government in the 1960s and 1970s decreed by the central government, the country underwent a fragmentation of municipalities after the fall of the communist regime in the 1990s (Illner 2010). The number of municipalities was reduced from more than 10,000 in 1950 to 4,120 in 1989. After the fragmentation process, the Czech Republic had more than 6,200 local governments in 2007.

For the further analysis of amalgamations in European countries, we include only the 10 countries with amalgamations during the last 40 years, and Sweden, which had finished its amalgamations in 1974. Not all questions have been answered by all countries.

1.4 Objectives

Increasing efficiency has been the most important objective of amalgamation reforms in all the observed countries. The professionalization of staff as another way to improve the efficiency of the use of a municipality's resources has been much less relevant (see table 1.3). The hope of achieving efficiency gains is bundled in almost all countries with an expected improvement in service quality.

Interestingly, the objective of increasing a municipality's room for maneuvering is important for most countries from viewpoint that more tasks would be delegated to the municipality. With regard to strengthening democracy and increasing the room for maneuvering for citizens, only a few countries consider this objective important.

Table 1.3: Objectives

Objectives	Countries		
	No Importance ⁶	Medium Importance	High Importance
<i>Improving Input</i>			
Efficiency (economies of scale, economies of scope)			Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland
More Specialized Staff	Denmark, Italy	Belgium, Finland, Iceland, Greece, Switzerland	
<i>Improving Output</i>			
Improving Service Quality		Denmark	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland
<i>Improving Room for Maneuvering</i>			
Evolution/ Delegation of Powers	Denmark	Iceland, Italy, Switzerland	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden
Democratization/ Participation/ Accountability	Denmark, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland	Belgium, Italy	Greece, Norway

1.5 Patterns of Conflict and Implementation

Territorial reforms are drastic changes for the concerned municipalities because they touch jurisdictional boundaries that have often existed for long periods of time. Amalgamation processes, therefore, often accompany opposition and resistance. In different countries, different patterns of conflict prevail, depending on the nature of the reform and the historical traditions in the particular country (Baldersheim/Rose 2010:14).

According to the expert survey (see table 1.4), the main pattern of conflict in territorial reforms occurs along the central-local dimension. Municipalities often try to prevent such reforms and oppose the central government's projects. The division between large and small municipalities, which likely results from the conflicting interests between large urban municipalities and their agglomerations, on the one hand, and smaller peripheral, rural municipalities, on the other hand, is also rather important. The results from studies on both Swedish and Icelandic municipalities demonstrate in both cases that the strongest explanatory variable for resistance

⁶ The experts assessed the various items on a scale from 1 (not important) to 5 (important). We have clustered the answers 1 and 2 as «No Importance», 3 as «Medium Importance», and 4 and 5 as «High Importance».

against amalgamation is each municipality's expected status in the new/potential municipality. The potential loss of status and power is something that does not seem to be acceptable for either voters or local leaders. Further, the lack of status could mean that the small municipalities are overruled or "swallowed" by the larger municipalities. The risk of not being the center for services and administration in the newly created municipality is, not surprisingly, strongly connected with the population size of the municipality. The largest municipality in each context is of course most likely to take on that role. Therefore, the status dimension and the size dimension are interrelated (Eythórsson 1998, 2009; Brantgärde 1974).

Regarding the conflict between large and small municipalities, there is, for example, great variation in Scandinavian countries, as Finland and Iceland have much higher grades than Sweden and Denmark. The country size variation of municipalities might explain this result, as the variation is much greater in Finland and Iceland than in Sweden and Denmark, where the reforms have managed to reduce these differences in size.

The different political viewpoints between left and right-wing parties appear to play a fairly important role in some countries. However, there is no clear country-type pattern. The same is true for the technocracy-politics conflict that can be observed in half of the countries. Such a result is understandable for countries such as Greece, where the reform has been requested by outside institutions owing to its financial problems.

Table 1.4: Patterns of Conflict

Conflicts	Countries		
	<i>No Importance</i>	<i>Medium Importance</i>	<i>High Importance</i>
Central-Local		Italy, Switzerland	Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden
Rich-Poor	Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway, Sweden	Finland, Germany	The Netherlands, Switzerland
Large-Small	Denmark, Italy, Sweden	Finland	Belgium, Germany, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland
Left-Right	Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Switzerland	Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway	Belgium, Greece, Sweden
Technocracy-Politics	Belgium, Denmark, Sweden	Germany, Switzerland	Finland, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Norway

Table 1.5 shows the greatest problems encountered during the reform process. The

most important overall factor is strong opposition from politicians. Such strong opposition can be explained by public choice theory. This theory assumes that individuals try to maximize their personal egoistic interests. Facing changes such as municipal amalgamations, elected local politicians can clearly have personal interest in keeping their jobs and status—by being reelected (Mouritzen 2006). Amalgamations reduce both the number of municipalities and, therefore, the number of elected politicians. Another reason may be that politicians are usually elected in electoral districts. By opposing amalgamations, politicians of rural and poorer areas receive the support of their voters. Moderately important factors are the opposition of employees (who may fear the loss of their job), insufficient resources for the implementation of the reform and the lack of time to prepare for the implementation well in advance.

Table 1.5: Problems during the Amalgamation Process

Implementation Problems	Countries		
	<i>No Importance</i>	<i>Medium Importance</i>	<i>High Importance</i>
Strong opposition of politicians	Sweden	Italy, Switzerland	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway
Strong opposition of employees	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Sweden		Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland
Insufficient resources for reform implementation	Belgium, Norway, Sweden	Finland, Germany, Iceland, Switzerland	Greece, Italy, the Netherlands
No time to prepare the implementation	Belgium, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland	Finland, Germany, Greece	Iceland, the Netherlands
Other reform projects at the same time	Belgium, Greece, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland	Germany, Italy	Finland, the Netherlands
Unclear/inconsistent reform objectives	Belgium, Greece, Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland	Germany, Italy	Finland

1.6 Outcome

The most important effect of amalgamations thus far has been improved service quality, which has been reported by all countries. Cost savings have been observed as well, but more countries report that cost savings has occurred only to some extent. Interestingly, improved service quality does not go in line with improved citizen orientation. Indeed, increased professionalization may lead to more standardization, which may not necessarily touch the heart of the citizens. Legal correctness is also not a major outcome of amalgamation reform, which is understandable because the rule of

law and its application play a crucial role in continental Europe even in small municipalities and because superordinate tiers of government oversee rule of law.

The strengthening of local autonomy appears to be another outcome that can be observed in most countries with amalgamations. At first sight, this result may seem to reflect a contradiction; however, by losing autonomy (through amalgamation with a neighbor municipality), a municipality gains autonomy in the long run because of the increase in financial power, the transfer of additional tasks to the municipality, and the decrease in the necessity for intermunicipal co-operation. Although autonomy increases, some countries state that the influence of the superordinate tier of government has increased as well. With respect to the municipality itself, local mayors and executives appear to profit more in their status after an amalgamation than the citizens themselves.

Table 1.6: Outcome of Amalgamations

Outcome	Countries		
	No Importance	Medium Importance	High Importance
<i>Improving Input</i>			
Cost savings		Finland, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland	Belgium, Germany, Greece, Iceland
<i>Improved Output</i>			
Improved professional quality	Italy		Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Sweden, Switzerland
Improved legal correctness	Finland, Germany, Italy, Switzerland	Iceland, Sweden	Belgium, Greece
Improved citizen orientation	Finland, Germany, Sweden	Belgium, Greece, Iceland, Italy, Switzerland	
More equal treatment of citizens	Sweden	Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Switzerland	Belgium, Iceland
<i>Room for Maneuvering</i>			
Strengthened local autonomy		Belgium, Finland, Germany, Iceland	Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland
Increased influence of the superordinate tier of government	Iceland, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland	Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands	
Strengthened local mayors/executives		Finland, Iceland, Italy, Switzerland	Belgium, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden
Strengthened local citizenship	Finland, Germany, Iceland, the Netherlands, Sweden	Greece, Italy, Switzerland	Belgium

1.7 Correlations between Different Phases of the Reform Process

As a next step, we want to more closely examine the correlations between the different phases of the reform process. We assume that the set objectives actors want to

achieve with amalgamation reforms lead to the choice of a specific reform strategy. The chosen strategy will lead to typical patterns of conflict and shape the outcome of the reform, as we have discussed in the conceptual paragraph of this chapter. These potential correlations are tested with Spearman's Rho as a measure of association. All significant correlations are shown in table 1.7.

Surprisingly, there are no significant correlations between the various objectives of the reform and the chosen strategy. The countries appear to select a strategy independently of the goals they want to achieve.

However, strong correlations can be observed between the chosen strategies and the patterns of conflict, on the one hand, and the outcome of the reform, on the other hand. Bottom-up reforms touch the heart of the citizens, as they are by far more accepted by citizens and are associated with higher citizen orientation. Moreover, mandatory reforms strengthen mayors and executives.

In contrast, the scope of the reform does not influence patterns of conflicts. The only significant difference between incremental and comprehensive reforms with respect to the outcome lies in the improved legal correctness of the municipality. Perhaps, comprehensive reforms better focus on this aspect rather the technocratic aspect owing to the involvement of national legal experts.

If the promoters of a reform use threats instead of incentives, the conflict between left- and right-wing parties becomes more visible.

Conflicts between politicians and technocrats have a negative impact on the achievement of reform goals. Collaboration between bureaucrats and politicians appears to be a necessity for successful reforms. Interestingly, conflicts per se do not hinder goal achievement; some conflicts even have a positive impact on the outcome. For instance, conflicts between small and large municipalities lead to cost savings—likely because smaller municipalities often produce more expensive public services and if their resistance toward reforms is diminished, cost savings could be achieved. A similar effect can be observed for conflicts between the central government and local governments, where mayors and executives are the winners, as they can likely exchange the approval for amalgamation for more influence.

Table 1.7: Significant Correlations between Different Phases of the Reform Process

Correlation		Measure of Association (Spearman's Rho)
Objectives	Strategies	
None		
Strategies	Patterns of Conflict	
Reform Initiative (1=bottom-up; 5=top-down)	Reform accepted by the public (1=not at all; 5=widely accepted)	-.635*
Scope of Reforms (1=incremental; 5=comprehensive)	Rich-Poor (1=not important at all; 5=very important)	-.779**
Convincing/Gaining Support (1=incentives/inclusion; 5=threats/exclusion)	Left-Right (1=not important at all; 5=very important)	.776**
Strategies	Outcome	
Reform Initiative (1=bottom-up; 5=top-down)	Improved citizen orientation (1=not at all; 5=very important)	-.760*
Scope of Reforms (1=incremental; 5=comprehensive)	Improved legal correctness (1=not at all; 5=very important)	.883**
Voluntariness of Reform (1=yes; 5=no)	Strengthened local mayors/executives (1=not at all; 5=very important)	.778*
Patterns of Conflict	Outcome	
Technocracy-Politics (1=not important at all; 5=very important)	Explicit reform goals achieved (1=not at all; 5=very important)	-.709*
Small-Large (1=not important at all; 5=very important)	Cost savings (1=not at all; 5=very important)	.808*
Central-Local (1=not important at all; 5=very important)	Strengthened local mayors/executives (1=not at all; 5=very important)	.742*

Note: Spearman's Rho; N=11; * p<.05, **

1.8 Conclusions

The choice of a territorial structure is a complex phenomenon. Often, '[...] territorial choices are fuzzy affairs with numerous battlefronts and bewildering claims of benefits and pitfalls [...]' (Baldersheim/Rose 2010: 234). The present comparative chapter aimed to provide an overview of the municipal structures, reform objectives, strategies, patterns of conflicts and outcomes associated with amalgamation reforms in selected European countries on the basis of the perception of country experts.

The results indicate that the objectives of amalgamation reforms primarily concern efficiency and service delivery criteria. Differences in items such as improving local democracy are substantial, suggesting that there is considerable variation in the objectives of mergers. The amalgamation strategies chosen by the countries are also very heterogeneous. Whereas some countries chose top-down strategies with intervention from the central government, others prefer bottom-up strategies, where the decision to merge is left to municipalities. In some cases, there is, however, a mix of

these two strategies.

Patterns of conflict during amalgamation processes are primarily related to the divide between central and local government as well as between small and large municipalities. This result is not surprising because territorial reforms touch jurisdictional boundaries, which have often been shaped through historical processes. Opposition occurs when the central government attempts to intervene or when smaller municipalities fear being 'swallowed' and overruled by larger municipalities. The greatest problems during the amalgamation processes appear to be connected with the strong resistance of politicians. We argue that owing to the reduction of municipalities through amalgamation, the number of local council seats would also be reduced. Therefore, politicians tend to defend their own situation, status and jobs by trying to prevent these reforms.

The analysis of the amalgamation reforms in the observed European countries indicates that the most important outcomes are improved service quality and, to some extent, cost savings. In addition, autonomy appears to increase after mergers. However, it should be kept in mind that, often, these effects do not occur 'automatically'; rather, they result from the decisions and actions of local authorities after the merger. Policy makers should not only carefully plan and implement amalgamation reforms but also devote attention to the stabilization process of the newly created municipalities. Actions taken or not taken could influence the course of the reform: to touch the hearts of citizens and include the financial goals and the professionalization of the municipality in the political agenda, it would be wise to select a reform strategy that involves the municipalities and citizens affected by the planned reforms. In times of crisis, such a goal may not be feasible. In such cases, it is at least beneficial to know that service quality can usually be improved through amalgamation; however, financial improvement may not necessarily be evident: amalgamations require a careful implementation process, and other reforms may have similar effects as well.

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