Reflections on 25 Years of Local Government Reforms in Europe

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The topic of my chapter is the three great waves of local government reforms in European countries over the last 25 years or so. I present some lessons from three broad, paradigmatic cases: the reform waves that started with the Thatcher years in the UK, the Scandinavian free commune experiments, and the post-communist decentralisation reforms. I then add some comments on what may become future directions for reform driven by digitalisation of local governance. The common denominator for the three waves of reform was *the aim of enhancing the responsiveness of local government to citizens' concerns.* The methods of working towards that goal were quite different, however. I do not delve deeply into how these reforms unfolded in individual countries[1]. My purpose is to develop a conceptual model for deconstructing reform processes with the aim of understanding the change mechanisms of reforms in particular.

I wish to distinguish reforms from minor adjustments of structures and procedures that occur frequently in most political–administrative systems, for example, as ad hoc responses to environmental pressures in one or more municipalities or ministerial initiatives with regard to one pet project or another. Reforms refer to intentional, planned overhauls of major components of the politico–administrative systems.

My discussion of the reforms is guided by five questions: *Why* did the reforms happen: what were the triggers that provided the political energy? *Who* were the actors – the change coalitions - that drove the reforms? *How* was the reform to occur: what was the change theory built into the reform? *Where* were the reforms heading: what were the values and visions that guided the reforms? And what were the *new problems* engendered, in turn', by the reforms, that possibly gave birth to new reforms?

The questions and an outline of the answers are indicated in table 1.

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1. For compact analyses of local government reforms in individual European countries, cf. for example Kersting and Vetter 2003, Denters and Rose 2005 or Lidstöm et al. 2011.

Table 1: Local government reform programmes: three cases

	UK reforms under Thatcher	**Scandinavian free commune experiments**	**Post-communist decentralisation**
Why: triggers	Inefficiency	Decline of autonomy	Regime collapse
Who: reform coalitions	Dominant party	Central-local partnerships	Emergent elites
How: change theory	Choice, competition	Experiments	Remodelling, shock therapy
Whence: values	Efficiency	Autonomy	Democracy
Where: visions	Liberal	Republican	Communitarian
Terminal: new problems	Institutional fragmentation	Overload	Territorial fragmentation

Triggers and reform coalitions

Reform movements may be infused with energy from a variety of sources. The source is frequently a more or less widespread feeling of failure or grievance; the feeling may be grounded in objective reality or may be founded on ideologically based convictions. In the case of the British reforms of the early 1980s, the ideological element was pronounced — the Conservatives were convinced that the «lunatic left» had hijacked many local authorities to pursue wild policies of indoctrination of the young or were too responsive to special minorities and not sensitive enough to the majority's needs (Sullivan 2003). In retrospect, even Labourites have acknowledged that trade unions had too much say in local governments, resulting in inefficient practices and overspending (Stoker 2004). The reform coalition was, at the outset, a determined group of Conservatives with a grip on the commanding heights of government after the Conservative election victory of 1979, against largely Labour-dominated local authorities that resisted the proposed changes.

In the Scandinavian case, the energy came from local government grievances over central government interference in local decision making (Baldersheim & Ståhlberg 1994). Municipalities felt that local autonomy was being severely restricted by detailed national legislation, earmarked grants and unfunded mandates as the municipalities in the post-war period had developed into important bodies of implementation for the welfare state. Local government spokesmen argued that if they were given more room for local discretion, it would be easier to find solutions that were well adapted to local conditions;

thus local services would not only be better attuned to local demands, they might be cheaper too, since more local discretion would mean national standards could be relaxed. The latter part of the argument was especially attractive to central governments who were worried about the soaring local expenditures. The free commune experiments that were initiated in response to the problems identified were largely partnership ventures between central and local governments. Initiated in Sweden in 1984, national parliaments enacted enabling legislation that empowered selected municipalities to dispense with standard national regulations in various fields to introduce their own alternative arrangements for a limited period. The idea of free commune experiments spread rapidly from Sweden to the other Nordic countries[2]. Most fields of public responsibility were affected by these initiatives — from school regulations to forest management. In many cases the new arrangements amounted to a local takeover of state functions. Although the change coalition took the form of central – local partnerships, with national authorities providing the necessary legal leeway and political support for the general idea, individual ministries and subordinate agencies in some cases proved reluctant to actually give up established controls, so that some issues had to be resolved at cabinet level.

In East-Central Europe, the immediate reform impetus came from the necessity of filling the institutional gaps that arose in 1989 in the wake of the collapse of the communist regimes and their discredited institutions of government. In some cases, there had been some time for the preparation of new local institutions ahead of the disappearance of the communists, especially in Hungary where the transition was rather stepwise, and also in Poland where the «round table» negotiations between Solidarity and the communists included drafts for new local government legislation (Baldersheim et al. 1996; Swianiewicz 2003). The change in Czechoslovakia and also in the countries further east was much more abrupt, so that local government reforms had to start from scratch and only after the communists had stepped down. Even where some preparation had been possible, only general outlines were drafted, and important details had to be filled in after the institutions had been established on the ground, for example, regarding finances and municipal property. Many developments and problems in later stages of institution-building are understandable in the light of the initial chaos of transition (observers remarked, for example, on the challenges of the triple transitions that had to be undertaken: establishing democracy, market economy and civil society all at once; Illner 2003). The reform coalitions driving the changes were the emergent new elites that replaced the communists. Naturally, the new brooms had

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2. Interestingly, France picked up the free commune idea in the decentralisation reforms that started under the Raffarin government 2003 – 2005 (Cole 2006).

little previous experience in government; this was so both at the national and local levels (Surazska 1997). Implementation of the reforms, therefore, to some extent took on the character of a trial-and-error process; this was also in part due to the many loose ends that had still not been tied up when the new institutions had to start functioning after the first round of local elections of 1990.

Change theories

How was *change* to be achieved? How were reforms made to work? What was the change theory that guided the reforms? I do not assume that the reforms were built on or drew on theories by any scientific meaning of the word. Still, all reforms seek to achieve change in one way or another. Through what kinds of action or series of actions is change to be achieved? This question is what evaluation studies refer to as *programme theory*, that is, the built-in ideas about action sequences that are expected to lead from goals to results (Bickmann 1987; Dahler-Larsen 2001).

The change mechanisms demonstrated by the waves of reform indicated earlier — the Thatcher initiatives, the free communes, and the post-communist revolutions — are those of *choice & competition*, *experiments & selection*, and *remodelling & shock therapy* respectively. I do not claim that these mechanisms exhaust the list of potential change-drivers in public institutions; a more complete list might include, for example, cohort shifts (new people replacing old cadres), technological factors, cultural clashes, financial crises, coalition shifts, and environmental changes. What I claim is that the three former types have been essential in bringing about (some measure of) change in the well-publicised reforms just mentioned and are therefore worth looking at more closely.

The Conservative reforms in the UK started out with efforts to curb local spending by first reducing the revenue basis of local government (removing the business tax) and then by more stringently controlling the levels of spending (Sullivan 2003; Stoker 2004). Gradually, the focus shifted to establishing a more consumer-responsive government. This was to be achieved by «giving the public choices, or by instituting mechanisms which build in publicly-approved standards, and redress when they are not attained», according to one of the ministers of the Thatcher government (Waldgrave 1993; quoted from Stoker 2004: 28). A distinction was made between «purchasers» and «providers»; the former acted as agents on behalf of the elected bodies, and the latter were the producers who deliver the services; the purchasers were to buy services from whoever could give the principals the best value for money, be it private or public producers. To emphasise the point, legislation was introduced to en-

sure compulsory, competitive tendering for public purchases. A second move was to transfer a number of functions from local authorities to single-purpose agencies (quangos) for their discharge (in education, public transport, economic development initiatives, etc). The overall aim was to institute mechanisms that would work as countervailing forces to what was seen as producer-dominance in local government service provision. These included the competitive tendering just mentioned, and further, more direct user control over the various single-purpose bodies, performance measures made available to the public (to guide user choices and to put pressure on producers) and a series of regulatory and supervisory bodies with powers to challenge local producers on behalf of users. These changes again set in motion the managerial revolution often referred to as New Public Management (Pollitt & Bouckaert 2000; Øgård 2005), the general features of which were devolution of authority and accountability to cost centres that were encouraged to think and act more like private firms, cost-conscious and consumer-oriented. The range of new choice and managerial measures introduced was probably demonstrated at its fullest by Braintree District Council and the London Borough of Westminster, although the level of enthusiasm for the new thinking varied even among councils controlled by the conservatives (Holliday 2000). Overall, user satisfaction with service provision improved over the ten-year period from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties (Stoker 2004: 38). Much of the Conservative legacy in local government was retained by the successive Labour governments, although certain modifications were introduced and a supplementary reform agenda outlined (Stoker 2004).

The central change mechanism of the Nordic free commune programmes was that of *experimental selection* of demonstrator projects. The administrative experiment was the key mechanism on which the programmes hinged. The core idea was that of the experiment as a learning cycle (cf fig. 1). The basics of the process may be outlined in the following manner (Baldersheim & Fimreite 1996): The central government invited local authorities to submit applications regarding regulations from which they would like to be exempted; as a part of their applications, the local authorities also outlined the alternative arrangements they would like to carry out. The outcome was a series of local initiatives for the central government to consider (in practice, through a secretariat located in the respective ministries for local government). Selection of initiatives was carried out by the secretariat according to criteria stipulated in the enabling legislation that established the programmes; the selection was approved by the relevant ministry (and in some countries also by Parliament).
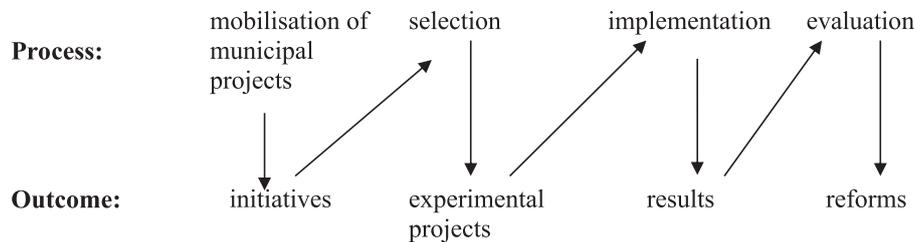
Process: mobilisation of   selection   implementation   evaluation
                municipal
                projects

Outcome: initiatives   experimental   results   reforms
                                  projects

Fig. 1: Free commune experiments as a learning cycle (Source: Baldersheim & Fimreite 1994).

In many cases, selection of experimental projects meant lengthy negotiations between the municipality in question and the central agency responsible for a particular field of government operations; this was especially the case when the project implied a local takeover of a national function. In the majority of cases, however, the selection process went fairly smoothly.

Implementation of approved projects was not always a straightforward matter, either. Running the project could be more complicated than anticipated. Trade unions at the local level could represent one obstacle, for example. Some projects never got off the ground, but they were not numerous. In Norway, the implementation rate was close to 90 percent. The final step was the *evaluation* of project results. Did the experimental projects lead to the anticipated results? Was the suggested alternative a good one? Could it be made into a general reform to apply to all municipalities? Some countries had established formal evaluation programmes along with the experimental programmes, with research institutions charged with observing and collecting data on the experiments as they unfolded; this was particularly so in Norway. In other countries, evaluation took place in-house, in the ministry responsible for local government affairs.

The overall end result of the free commune experiments was not primarily a series of specific reforms that imposed new institutional patterns on local government as a whole. Instead, numerous national regulations were relaxed, granting local governments more freedom to decide for themselves how to run their affairs. Interestingly, all four countries enacted new local government legislation in the early 1990s, with much greater leeway for municipalities with regard to institutional choice. Specific legislation, for example, for education, was overhauled in a similar spirit, removing stipulations that were thought too restrictive by municipalities. The lasting legacy of the free commune programmes was an enhancement of local autonomy, not a specific type of reform.

When I suggest that *remodelling* with an element of *shock therapy* was a conspicuous change mechanism in the post-communist reforms, I wish to emphasise that the reform programmes consisted of more than a mere passive copying of blueprints or wholesale transfers of institutional packages from abroad; institution-building certainly also included elements of «enactment» (Fountain

2001) and problem-solving — creative processes of adaptation. There is enough variation across countries to demonstrate that independent institutional engineering took place in all countries. However, a consistent theme of reform programmes was what has been termed a «rectifying» orientation – a desire to «return» to «normalcy», to become a «normal» country (Illner 2003; Swianiewicz 2002). The standards of normalcy were what the new elites took to be the basic elements of democracy and the market economy as they observed them in Western Europe. In contrast to the Nordic free commune experiments, the informal slogan that guided post-communist reforms seemed to be that of «No experiments, please!» On a personal note, I remember vividly from my first visit to Bratislava in June 1990 the banners that decorated the city centre, proclaiming «Back to Europe!» And as local democracy was seen as a vital element of a democratic order, democratic decentralisation was put on the earliest reform agendas. Elected councils, accountable local administrations and an independent financial basis for local decision making were introduced within little more than a year after the communist debacle. Many aspects of the reforms were incomplete and some elements took a decade to be put in place (e. g., a democratic regional government or coherent financial systems). Local autonomy was also rather limited in some of these countries; the mindset of centralisation took a long time to die (if it ever did). The subsequent drive to join the European Union meant that even more pressure to harmonise institutional patterns with «normal» European standards was brought to bear on institutional development. For example, in Poland, the Czech Republic or Slovakia, it took the pressure of the EU requirement of democratically elected regional governments as a precondition for membership to reach national agreement on the shape of the regional level (Baldersheim & Malíkóva 2011). The Council of Europe through its Charter of Local Government and the bodies of foreign assistance such as the British Know-How Fund were further sources of institutional models with an impact on the design of local government in post-communist countries. Furthermore, mayors and other local government personnel were often eager to go on study tours to West European countries (Baldersheim et al. 2002). In some cases, remodelling also meant returning to patterns from the nation's past, such as, for example, the tradition of dual functions, delegated and independent tasks, dating back to the Habsburg era (Illner 2003). Imitation is not the whole story, of course; other types of causality have also to be considered to explain the whole range of variation in terms of institution-building — variations in transitional circumstances, levels of economic development, political cultures, etc. (Illner 2003). However, my main point here is not discussing the whole range of possible explanations of variations in post-communist decentralisation reforms. I focus on remodelling as a *typical* change mechanism in these reforms, not necessarily the only one.

However, the introduction of new institutional models was accompanied (to varying extents) by *cultural shock*. The newness of the post-communist order caused considerable disorientation among actors at the local level (Suraszka 1996). To work this into a model of change, I have found it useful to divide the post-communist local reform processes into three stages (Baldersheim 2003): translation, naturalisation and normalisation. The focus in the respective stages is on rules, roles and habits. In the first stage, the rules, the legal foundation of the institution is worked out, with a script from a foreign model in mind; even if there is an element of copying, the rules have to be worked into a different national context and sometimes a different political culture. In the second stage, naturalisation, as disorientation wears off, actors have to learn to *apply* the rules and learn the *roles,* the bundles of behavioural norms that make up the institutional order – what is the role of the mayor, the councillor, the chief executive, and so on? There may be room for creativity in role interpretation, especially at the early stages of institution-building — mayors may perform their roles quite differently, even with reference to the same rule book. In this stage, the institutions begin to take on a local colouring and are accepted as one's own. Normalisation means habituation, when roles and rules become «habits of the heart» in de Tockeville's expression (Bellah et al. 1985), which means that institutions become «infused with value» (Selznick 1957). At this stage, change has become institutionalised, that is, embedded in actors' value systems. This may be necessary for the smooth functioning of public administration. Paradoxically, when institutions become value-laden, they also become resistant to change for that very reason (March & Olsen 1989). Of course, institution-building may not necessarily reach this stage, in which case institutions remain unstable. Russia is a case in point. Decentralisation reforms have proven extremely difficult to carry out; this is not for lack of initiatives — there have been several attempts, but they have been contradictory or half-hearted, either ill-designed or backed up by weak change coalitions, so they have hardly passed through the early stages of implementation, and certainly not normalisation (Wollmann & Butusova 2003). The vicissitudes of the decentralisation reforms in Russia may also reflect more divided attitudes towards the West European «model countries», dampening the modelling urge. A similar fate also befell decentralisation reforms in some of the Balkan countries during the 1990s (cf. e. g. Kopric 2003 on Croatia).

Values

The normative foundation of local government includes the *values* of local autonomy (freedom from state interference), democracy (scope for citizen participa-

tion and influence) and efficiency (making the most of available resources) (Sharpe 1970). Where these values are cherished, local government is the answer to institution-builders. Individual reforms do not necessarily emphasise all three core values in equal measure. One value may be pursued more vigorously than the others, depending on what the change coalition sees as the overarching problems to be solved. The value orientation of reformers also reveals what they see as the most urgent legitimacy problem of local government at a particular moment. There could be little doubt that the UK reformers saw efficiency as a pressing issue and sought to put in place new institutions and procedures that would enhance efficiency, in terms of both value for money and better responsiveness to consumer preferences (external efficiency). Choice and competition were to be the answers to efficiency problems. The lack of efficiency threatened the legitimacy of local government in the long run. That the cure may have threatened it even more is a different matter, to which I shall return.

The free commune experiments were concerned, above all, with local autonomy. As pointed out earlier, the constraining impacts of successive, ill-coordinated central government initiatives on behalf of local government had left municipalities with less and less room for manoeuvre, in the view of local leaders, while the expectations of citizens were mounting. Enhancement of local democracy and effectiveness would come as a result of widening autonomy, the argument ran, so more autonomy was the basic prerequisite, including more local influence over (previous) state functions. Central governments responded to the free commune programmes as steps towards more local flexibility and discretion in decision making (the contrast to the Thatcher programme was striking; the British medicine meant curbing local autonomy and depriving municipalities of functions).

In the post-communist transformations, considerations regarding local democracy took precedence. Such a priority was not surprising: With the memories of communist autocracy fresh in everyone's mind, the new elites needed to demonstrate regime change in a palpable manner. Preparing the ground for local elections was also seen as an urgency in order to avoid an entrenchment of «old structures» (a euphemism for old communists) at the local level. (In the local elections of 1990 in East-Central Europe, 60–70 percent of the councillors elected were new brooms, without previous experience in local government. In elections to the post of mayor, however, more experienced people were chosen — 65 percent of Slovak mayors had previous experience, for example; Offerdal et al. 1996). Other expressions of concern about the state of democracy were the institutions of direct democracy and the series of checks on the local executive powers instituted in many countries, viz. citizen initiatives, referenda and recall of mayors (where there was a direct mayoral election, as in Slovakia). Participation in local elections was high at the outset in many countries, for

example, a 75 percent turnout in the Czech Republic in 1990 and the same level in the new German *Länder* in the same year. Turnout was substantially lower in Hungary and Poland, however (39 and 42 percent). In most post-communist countries, participation in local elections has fallen since the early euphoric days of reform, hovering at the same level as that in many West European countries – another sign of «normalisation», perhaps.

Visions

I argue that the reforms under analysis flow from overarching political visions and value sets that might possibly be termed reform philosophies, although pragmatism was also very much in evidence among reformers. It is, however, not so difficult to identify the core elements of a liberal philosophy in the Thatcher reforms: an emphasis on individual freedom and choice, a distrust of bureaucracy and collective arrangements, a belief in the market, etc. Many of the components of reforms make sense when interpreted in the light of such orientations. The retention of large-scale local government units (the largest in Europe) may seem less compatible with the liberal philosophy (John 2010) as New Right analysts have often pointed out the advantages of a small scale in terms of adaptive capacities (Ostrom 1973).

The Scandinavian concern regarding enhancement of local autonomy through free commune experiments was intended to make more room for local decision making, that is, giving the elected bodies and their leaders more say over local agendas and priorities. Consequently, local politics and leadership would come more to the forefront. This again was expected to lead to a clarification of political responsibility in the eyes of the voters and, hence, an improvement of accountability. While the UK reforms emphasised the businesslike features of local government, the Scandinavians highlighted the political nature of local governance. The latter reform, therefore, implicitly suggests a *republican* philosophy with an emphasis on the primacy of politics and leadership as formative forces for local citizenship and community development. The (initially surprising) local interest in taking over state functions further underlined the willingness to subject more public functions to local political accountability. The ideal reflected in the totality of the experimental projects was that of the integrated, multi-functional municipality under democratic control.

The collapse of communist regimes with their institutions and value systems created a disorientation in segments of the population. Trust was not automatically extended to the new institutions. The quest for identity sought more primordial foci, such as family, locality, region, or circles of friends, a de-

velopment that has been characterised as a spread of *communitarian* orientations (Illner 2003) or identity quests through roots. A communitarian ethos also had some impact on the decentralisation reforms, if not by design, at least by default, triggering moves to dismantle previously amalgamated local units. In the Czech Republic, the number of municipalities rose by almost 40 percent to more than 6.000. The number doubled in Hungary (to 3.313), while the increase was around 26 percent in Slovakia and 12 percent in Croatia (it remained unchanged in other countries, however, such as Poland or Latvia). In some countries, regionalist parties had some initial electoral success (the Moravian party in the Czech Republic, for instance; Clark & Swianiewicz 1996).

New problems

Reforms aim at solving problems, and may do so, but they may also engender new problems that have to be faced by a new generation of reformers. One of the legacies of the Thatcher reforms was *fragmentation* of local governance. A multitude of semi-independent, single-purpose agencies was created to facilitate efficient service production, and a range of regulatory bodies was established to ensure compliance with citizen-friendly standards. The sum of these creations was fragmented structures of community decision making. Coordinating these institutions in a community development perspective was the challenge faced by the labour reformers (Stoker 2004). Joined-up government was launched as the answer. Theoretically, notions of governance — non-hierarchical decision-making — and multi-level governance came to the fore in UK research on local politics (e. g., Pierre & Peters 2000), no doubt in response to the need to grasp a more institutionally fragmented local scene.

The free commune experiments did result in extension of autonomy and, consequently, new responsibilities for local governments. What municipalities discovered further down the road, however, was that the available resources did not always match the new responsibilities. Local authorities complained about insufficient funding relative to the tasks for which they were responsible. The response of central governments was to start examining the structure of local government — were there too many small municipalities with inadequate resource bases and lack of qualified personnel? The Danish government in 2007 radically reduced the number of municipalities to 98 (down from 270) and went on to abolish the county councils (Mouritzen 2010). A Norwegian minister for local government affairs announced that she would like to reduce the number of municipalities by at least 100, to make them more viable (however, the subsequent red-green coalition put structural reforms on hold). The Swedish government appointed a commission to examine the sustainability of

the existing local government order; the small print of the commission's mandate was a question mark over the smallest municipalities. Interestingly, the proposed structural changes were proclaimed in defence of local autonomy, understood as a (better) capacity for service provision (Lidström 2010).

In terms of local government structure, the post-communist reform legacy was, in a number of countries, territorial fragmentation. Numerous tiny municipalities emerged from splitting of previous amalgamations, as pointed out earlier. After the reforms, the average number of inhabitants in Hungarian municipalities, for example, was around 1300. The small-scale character of local government proved to be an obstacle to further decentralisation as the majority of municipalities were deemed too small and weak to take over tasks that might be a natural local responsibility, such as primary education. So the success of the initial wave of decentralisation and democratisation became an excuse for retaining central control. Local autonomy remains limited in many post-communist countries (Illner 2010).

General lessons

The three reforms sought to deal with largely the same underlying problem: how to create more responsive local governments. Diagnoses and cures varied: complaints over a predominance of producer interests in the Thatcher case, too much central government interference in the Scandinavian case, and a yearning for local democracy and proximity in the post-communist case. The three waves of reform demonstrated that future reformers have several reform «models» to choose from.

All three cases have interesting potential for *institutional learning*. The free commune experiments have already been spelt out as learning cycles. Choice and competition and remodelling can also be analysed as learning processes. Service providers may learn from the choice of consumers and improve their acts if necessary. The political masters may also learn from information about consumer choices (or synthetically from user surveys or other performance indicators). And the citizen may learn about the service providers if given the right information, and so on. Development and application of performance indicators have almost become industries in their own right (Kuhlmann et al. 2004).

However, can remodelling and shock therapy be called learning in a rational sense? A common definition of organisational learning emphasises the experiential component of learning processes: the capability to change behaviour on the basis of information about consequences of previous decisions (March & Olsen 1976). Organisational change means changing or correcting *routines* (Levitt & March 1988). The informational basis for change may, however, also

include the experiences of *other* organisations. Organisations may learn from each other. The example of others may also provide valuable clues for change. How valuable the examples are depends on the quality of the information available about those experiences.

To fully understand the learning cycles of reforms in local government, *learning processes across borders* must be taken into account (Baldersheim et al. 2002). All the three waves of reform discussed here had an impressive border-crossing capacity. The market-oriented reforms initiated during the Thatcher period travelled widely under the label of New Public Management. The free commune experiments spread rapidly among the Nordic countries, and, as mentioned before, were picked up as a reform model by France in 2003 under the Raffarin government. And, as I have argued, post-communist decentralisation was conceived and implemented with the eyes of the reformers fixed very much upon model countries in Western Europe.

John Loughlin emphasises European integration as the principal driver of the new border-crossing framework of regional and municipal exchanges, which he interprets as harbingers of far-reaching shifts of the political order of the nation-states: «Previously, the nation-state was the framework within which solutions were sought and national governments the principal actors that would supply these solutions. This was the old centre-periphery framework…. Since then (the 1980s), both the framework and the role of national actors have changed» (Loughlin 2001: 387–388).

To understand the dynamics of the new framework, the concept of *learning ecologies* is useful (Baldersheim & Øgård 2011). In an effective cross-border learning regime, three groups of actors often come together: local champions of change in search of solutions to local problems, knowledge brokers with (hopefully) relevant expertise, and national gate-keepers whose permission may be necessary for exchanges to take place between local champions and knowledge brokers, especially if the latter are non-nationals. The most vital resource of the learning process is the motivation of the local champions, without which the reform process will quickly founder. The gatekeepers can rarely create local motivation and they may also easily stifle it; they may, however, in a well-run process, stimulate and nurture it. Knowledge brokers should be regarded as providers of propositions to local champions, not solutions, as the champions will usually adapt and amend whatever is offered so that the final outcome at the local level will rarely be an exact copy of whatever was suggested or agreed to at the outset. Such an outcome should not necessarily be treated as a failure but rather as an indication of creative adaptation, as suggested by theories of «bottom-up» implementation (Offerdal 2005).

However, Loughlin's emphasis on European integration as the prime driver of the new learning framework may be too restrictive to fully capture the forces

at work in shaping patterns of reform in today's world; in my opinion, new technologies should be added to the list of change drivers, making for *global* learning processes.

ICTs *as the new major change driver: implications for cross-border learning*

It is becoming increasingly apparent that the on-going fusion of digital information, sound and pictures, known as information & communication technologies (ICTs), is changing the face of public administration, including local government (Dunleavy et al. 2006). Instant information and 24-hour service provision is spreading, at least as an ideal, if not always as a reality. A 24-hour democracy is emerging. An American company peddling systems solutions for internet voting recently coined the slogan «Vote in your underwear!» (Kersting & Baldersheim 2004). ICTs have been hailed as providing opportunities for vitalising representative democracy with a potential for direct democracy; others see virtual politics as a debasement of democracy (Buchstein 2004). Nevertheless, local authorities are undoubtedly making use of ICTs as they see fit, to enhance both service provision and local democracy. In electronically advanced cities, «the virtual town hall» may already include online service delivery as well as online elections and instant, online community consultations (Baldersheim et al. 2008; Baldersheim & Kersting 2012).

Whether this will lead to more enlightened citizens or just more impatient consumers remains to be seen. What is beyond doubt is that ICTs in general and the Internet in particular make more information available more quickly to citizens and reformers alike. This again is going to speed up reform processes. We are going to see more change in local government in the future, not less. This also means that we are going to see more cross-border learning as it becomes easier and easier for local authorities to keep abreast of what is happening elsewhere. We are already witnessing the emergence of self-organised learning communities of municipalities on the net; these are municipalities facing similar challenges, trying out solutions in real time and sharing results instantly over the net (Askim et al. 2008). Some of these networks are organised by the gatekeepers, but the net offers opportunities for bypassing the national gatekeepers. In the future, gatekeepers are likely to become more marginalised in cross-border learning regimes while champions and knowledge brokers become the drivers of change. One implication of this trend is that national governance of the development of local government will have to change — towards more collaboration and guidance and less steering and control.

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