Convergence or Divergence? Italian Local Government’s zigzagging trajectory out of CEN

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Abstract. The paper addresses the topic of comparative study of local government systems and their reforms by providing evidence on the Italian case as a hybrid zone of local government, thus assessing the major role these evolutions assume in comparative perspective. Different theoretical approaches to local government patterns and reform trajectories have been largely discussed in literature. Mixed forms and evidence are also accounted for. Despite this coverage, the Italian case still turns out to be a pilot case. The recent wave of institutional, financial and political change in this country provided in fact a further step within a “moving hybrid zone” and a confirmation of a zigzagging trajectory. The three constitutive features (functional, territorial and political) which may shape the pattern and trajectory of a country’s local government are scrutinized by taking into account some of their major aspects and by focusing on the last reform wave (2012-2017). Evidence shows that, contrarily to the consolidated literature thus far, Italian local government does not belong to a specific model (namely the Continental Europe Napoleonic pattern - CEN) but to a moving hybrid zone. Mining from the Italian experience, the paper aims at providing a framework for other non-straight trajectories and hybrid conditions in European patterns of Local Government.

[very preliminary draft. Please don’t quote without permission]

1. Introduction

Studies on comparative local reforms in Europe recently emphasized the relevance of trajectories through which countries experienced change of their traditional pattern (Baldersheim and Rose, 2010; Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Kuhlmann, 2017). Consequently scholars devoted increasing attention on process as an insightful perspective for understanding programs, implementation and impacts (Baldersheim and Rose, 2010; Lippi and Tsekos, 2018).

Reform trajectories leading to convergence or divergence in respect to the consolidated pattern in each country - that is if and how a certain model of local government, under domestic and/or external pressures, is converging toward another model or is diverging from its traditional one - thus becomes particularly interesting in comparative perspective.

This paper aims at contributing in this comparative line of research on local government patterns and on reform trajectories by exploring the Italian case. Italy may in fact provide emblematic empirical insights, from a comparative perspective since its long-term empirical trajectory seems to differ from the traditional pattern this country is assigned to.

In this paper we will thus undertake an exploration of the most recent phase (2012-2017) of local government reforms. This last phase allows to look back at the past 25 years of reform attempts with an overall perspective and to understand more insightfully the trajectory drawn by Italian local government in respect of its starting pattern.

Section 2 will present the theoretical background of this reasoning, while Section 3 will display the Continental Europe Napoleonic (CEN) pattern and resume the first Italian reform trajectory until 2012. Evidence on the second and more recent Italian local government’s trajectory on the three constitutive features will be presented in Section 4. Finally, in Sections 5 and 6 we will discuss the findings and conclude on the relevance of the Italian case also as a potential spillover case for comparative studies on local reforms, respectively.
2. Patterns, Hybrids, and Trajectories in Local Government Reforms

Comparative studies on Local Government’s patterns in Europe emphasized variety and differences as driving factors (Kuhlmann, 2017). Each European country is considered belonging to a specific pattern, determined by some recurrent and prominent factors, representing the main dimensions of local government: the functional, the territorial and the political factor. These three features are usually integrated into two further contextual factors concerning the administrative culture and the type of State. Taken together, these factors allow to list six empirical patterns in European local government (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Kuhlmann and Bouckaert, 2016): the Continental European Napoleonic (CEN) affecting France and Southern Europe, the Continental European Federal (Germany, Switzerland and Austria), the Nordic European (NE) (the Scandinavians and the Netherlands), The Central-Eastern European (CEE) (post-communist countries), the Southern-Eastern European (SEE) (the Balkans’ countries) and the Anglo Saxon (AS) (UK, Ireland and Cyprus). All these Local Government patterns are obviously susceptible of transformation following external and/or endogenous pressures. Both pressures may challenge the original pattern, by putting it in the condition to be reshaped or readjusted according to external or internal momentum (Kuhlmann and Wayenberg 2016).

When a local government pattern changes, one may wonder what its evolution may be. The concept of trajectory in comparative Local Government Studies has been sketched repeatedly (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014; Kuhlmann and Bouckaert, 2016). In general, trajectories ideally connect a country’s starting pattern to its final model in the light of the occurred reforms, and they display its evolution path. Scholars use the idea of trajectory in several (and sometimes different) ways. It is employed to display the policy change embedded in reforms and the path to different outcomes [Broeckema et al. 2016]. In this sense trajectories may concern either specific aspects of local government (e.g. amalgamations, local public services management and delivery, etc...) or a comprehensive reform as a whole (e.g. centralizing or decentralizing trends; local public administration overhauls, etc...) [Ongaro 2011]. Trajectories have been also scrutinized when innovations for local government have been promoted by supra-national agencies [Mussari et al. 2016]: this is the case of many NPM reforms as well as that of the austerity programs in the recent global crisis. The focus on the process and on the outcomes have often highlighted how innovations, forced from outside, have been reshaped and integrated in the original pattern.

In this sense, trajectories have to do with hybridization (Painter and Peters, 2010) or contamination through external inputs, e.g. when local governments are invited to implement ‘recipes’ provided by consultants or agencies (Lippi and Tsekos, 2018b). Mimetic or normative isomorphism leaves room to local intervention and the trajectory hence depicts the contrasting inside/outside forces leading to the final result. Trajectories may also portrait local governments’ inner reshaping and adjustments (or biases) to reforms and the different implementation at the local level. This last point has been explored in particular when change involves overlapping authorities, such as in federal or regionalized states. Maiz et al. (2010) for Spain, Walter-Rogg (2010) for Germany, as well as the most part of studies on Western devolutions in the last years (Loughlin 2001; Baldi 2006; Ventura 2008; Erk and Koning 2010), showed how overlapping arrangements between center and periphery are frequently adopted. Kincaid (1990) described the pendulum between cooperative and coercive federalism in the USA, while Posner (2007) reintroduced the idea of a recentralization in federal states according to the functional design without modifying the territorial and the political ones. Italy is a clear case of variable geometry (Bolgherini, Lippi and Maset, 2016) in a regionalized state.

All this evidence weakens the idea of static patterns and introduces that of hybrid zones and zigzagging trajectories. Hybrid local government zones may thus play a greater role than it is usually admitted. As in the case of the administrative traditions studied by Painter and Peters (2010), hybridity seems to be a regular feature (ivi, 13). A hybrid system is one in which “foreign imports or transplants have at keypoints in history created a new departure, the legacy of which persists in a distinctive ‘amalgam’ of the foreign and the local” (Painter and Peters 2010, 11). They usually emerge when the borders between traditions are not crystal-clear and “tradition changes and evolves in such a way that different traditions coexist or overlie each other, within the same administrative time and place” (ibidem, 13). We transfer this concept to local government, meaning by hybrid an evolutionary
condition which is both different from the original pattern and still not convergent towards another already consolidated pattern. In other words the end situation entails important modifications from the starting condition (original pattern) although without totally subverting its original identity. This implies the possibility of a provisional and continuously changing situation, which could be labeled as a change in the pattern, more than a change of the pattern (Bolgherini, Di Giulio, Lippi 2018).

As well, zig-zagging reform trajectories refer to a non-straight transition, to an uncertain, sometimes unclear or even contradictory reform path, from the starting to the current situation. Provisional or transitional arrangements may be often introduced, which induce step-by-step adaptations and layering evolutions.

According to the literature on local government patterns and reform impacts, reform trajectories may be investigated with regard to three constitutive features: functional, territorial and political (Kuhlmann and Wayenberg 2016; Hesse and Scharpe 1991; Page 1991; Page and Goldsmith 1987; 2010; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2013).

The functional aspect concerns the scope and salience of the functional responsibilities assumed by local territorial bodies from the vertical allocation of functions between local and central government (separate versus fused systems; dual versus monistic function model) and the financial autonomy. The territorial aspect regards the territorial structure and the operational capacity of local government’s bodies (e.g. small-sized municipalities versus merged ones). The political aspect concerns the local democracy features, the access to the national sphere, the role of the mayors and of the other local bodies (e.g. political versus legal localism, following Page and Goldsmith 1987; 2010).

Against this background, after having described its starting point (the CEN pattern), the Italian trajectories will be described through the three aspects and relevant major aspects.

3. The first Italian trajectory (1990-2012)

The Italian pattern of Local Government is unquestionably reputed by scholars as a Continental Europe Napoleonic pattern (CEN) (Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2013; Loughlin et al. 2010). Its (originally grounded on the French pattern) unitary arrangement favored many and small size municipalities with limited legal power, many tasks delegated by upper levels and a significant political relevance with respect the national political system. A traditional Weberian bureaucracy inspired to, and controlled by, the State bureaucracy certified the affinity with the traditional prominence of bureaucracy in Southern Europe political systems (Sotiropoulos, 2006). Indeed, a so-called ‘fused’ system for local public service management and delivery according to the integrated approach completed above-mentioned model.

Since 1990 however, local government has been subject to significant changes that added stepwise innovative elements to the CEN consolidated format (Brunazzo, 2010; Bolgherini and Lippi, 2016). A sort of never-ending wave of reforms although each characterized by limited and negotiated change (Bull and Rhodes, 2007), whose overall result was however divergent from the original CEN pattern.

Its main features were in fact: a strong role of (local) politics (with a strong local legitimacy due to the direct election of mayors and to the consolidation of political representation as partially independent from the national party system); a pervasive NPM at the local level (much more than at the central one); a strong fiscal autonomy; an intense outsourcing and privatization, that implied public private partnership and a strong involvement of NGOs in management and delivery of some public (especially health and social) services; an increasing up- and transcending trend in many policy areas (Bobbio, 2005; Piatttoni and Brunazzo, 2010; Lippi, 2010; Baldini and Baldi, 2014; Bolgherini and Dallara 2016).

All these choices/dynamics were triggered at the beginning of the 1990s, but they continued be enacted and pursued all along a quarter of a century. Some of them have been abandoned and then restored, others continued to be steadily relevant in the public agenda. This portrait shows how both some elements of convergence with the Nordic countries’ pattern (e.g upsaling, outsourcing and public-private partnerships-PPP, fiscal autonomy) and some elements anchored to the CEN Southern group (e.g. transcending, strong mayors) are present in the Italian case. Italy’s trajectory during those years thus appears definitely as zig-zagging, by mining some elements from a pattern and some others from another model.
Following Bolgerini and Lippi (2016) the whole Italian trajectory may be recalled into three main phases: a *reallocation* of legal power in the 1990s (where a significant empowering of local government was enacted through decentralization and delegation of tasks, the launch of fiscal and decisional autonomy, a relevant political independence through the direct election of mayors and provinces and finally an organizational autonomy powered by a massive NPM strategy); a *reshaping* of institutional setting in the 2000s, where a reorganization of meso-government took place, as a domino effect of the empowerment of the local tiers, through a change of the Constitution awarding the regions with new legal power and promoting a so called quasi-federalist arrangement (Lippi 2011); a *rescaling* of territorial arrangement, after 2008 and still on-going, where a rearrangement of intergovernmental relations was enacted to redefine local government and their relations with the meso-government and the State. This last phase (rescaling) was adopted in the light of a harsh fiscal retrenchment (Bussu and Galanti, 2015; Kickert et al. 2015) when reforming local government was enhanced by a rhetoric of cost saving and austerity. 

Table 1 recalls the three main features and their elements as usually considered by the literature on local government and public administration concerning Italy, that is the Continental Europe Napoleonic (CEN) system in its Southern subgroup articulation. As well, the table shows how some of these features already diverged from this pattern in the last quarter of a century, that is since the 1990s, and shaped instead a hybrid zone.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional CEN pattern (assumed by the literature)</th>
<th>Trajectory since the 90s⇒</th>
<th>Hybrid zone since the 90s until the last reform wave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fused allocation of functions</td>
<td>Reallocation</td>
<td>Mixed allocation of functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarce financial autonomy</td>
<td>Reshaping</td>
<td>Strong financial autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small-sized municipalities</td>
<td>Rescaling/transcaling</td>
<td>Small-sized municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No major territorial reform (Southern model)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Attempts to territorial/functional reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of direct democracy</td>
<td>Bottom-up participation</td>
<td>Forms of deliberative democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dual executive</td>
<td>Presidentialization</td>
<td>Strong mayors (directly elected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political liberalism</td>
<td>Reinforcement</td>
<td>Mayors' spring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ compilation from Loughlin et al. 2010; Kuhlmann and Wayenberg 2016; Kuhlmann 2017; Bolgerini and Lippi 2016.

The 2012-2017 period represents a further step in the Italian trajectory. These years do not differ in terms of number of laws and provisions from the previous ones, but the functional, territorial and political factors turn out to display partially different features than in the past, as it will be discussed later. These years thus represent a crucial point of analysis for understanding the nature of the current Italian trajectory.

In which direction will this trajectory head? Will it lead the country to a further divergence from the traditional CEN pattern or will it be a step back towards the origins? To answer this question, in the next section the three main features of a local government pattern (functional, territorial and political) will be analyzed for the 2012-2017 years through a set of relevant aspects.


In the following pages we will try to detect the change occurred to the Italian hybrid zone and to its (briefly sketched above) elements. For each of the constitutive factors of a local government pattern, one or more sub-aspects have been considered (shown in Table 2). The functional aspects entails both financial matters and functional features, articulated here in fiscal autonomy and regulatory governance. As for the territorial aspect, a special focus has been devoted to the second-tier for the major change it experienced in terms of rescaling (upscaling): provinces and their functional equivalent (the metropolitan areas) have been taken into account. As well, the amalgamation processes have been considered due to their impacting with the defragmentation issue and the size of municipalities. The political aspect has been covered by looking at politicians’ career paths at the local level, as a key-indicator of political localism and access to the over-ranked authorities.
4.1 Functional feature

A) Regulatory governance at a turning point?
Since 2012 the austerity agenda imposed by the Monti government - then implemented by the following left-wing executives - have strengthened the regulatory governance approach used in Italy, in search for a rationalization (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2014). For instance, as far as the management of water, waste and local transport was concerned, while new territorial units were established by regional governments, Italy’s central government continued to rationalize the system, favouring corporatization and the creation of a limited number of companies by aggregating the multitude of private companies owned by municipalities (Profeti 2016; Di Giulio 2016). In 2015 and 2016 the central government tried to disentangle the ambiguous and overlapping legislation and to rule the regulatory governance by introducing regulations aimed at rationalizing the confused and redundant arrangements, mainly by limiting the municipal legal power and by establishing financial constraints [Citroni et al. 2018]. But once again it was made through a patchwork of rules, restrictions and ambiguous prescriptions. Indeed, the decrees regulated how a municipality can actually ‘save’ its pre-existing firms and how to convert them in the light of new requirements. After two decades, the NPM-inspired regulatory governance in Italy was thus still in search of legally clear basic requisites for establishing an effective purchaser-provider governance. The recent acts continued in fact to follow the previous pattern of regulatory governance without any shift of paradigm, but simply looking for more rationalization and simplification: a sort of political will to maintain the pattern notwithstanding the evident pitfalls of the approach. To sum up, the 2012-2017 phase displayed a more concrete and pragmatic approach, far from previous ambitious political projects and now paying more attention to the feasibility of the policy program and to the concerned context (Citroni, Lippi and Profeti, 2016).

B) The ‘up & down’ of fiscal autonomy
Local Government’s autonomy in Italy resembled a pendulum (Baldi and Baldini, 2914; Lippi, 2015; Bolgherini and Lippi, 2016; Ladner et al. 2016). After a decentralization trend in the 1990s, a creeping recentralization took place in the following decade in the aftermath of the global crisis. Recentralization encompassed many aspects: from internal management to the intergovernmental relation with the state. In both cases local autonomy and (political, administrative and fiscal) discretion decreased (Bolgherini, 2016). In times of austerity, fiscal autonomy thus rapidly became synonym of local autonomy in general (Citroni, Lippi and Profeti, 2018): all strategies for cost containment and balanced budget significantly addressed also local governments and spilled over to constrain municipal decision-making and to reinforce central controls at large. More specifically, a first strategy concerned a sort of ‘cheese slicing’ cutbacks that generically affected the public sector as a whole (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2014); a second strategy concerned selected cutbacks explicitly focused on local public spending, and specifically related to the social services; an additional and third set of limits induced the local governments to self-contained spending through generic limits to local policies and increasingly stiff budgets (IFEL, 2016) that induced most municipalities either to look for alternative sources of funding or to self-reduce their public service delivery. On the other hand, rationalization and recentralization allowed municipalities to get some additional source for funding local policies, independently from State transfers, thus partially restoring fiscal autonomy. In other words, a regained (although still very weak) fiscal autonomy coupled with more rigidity and with central supervision and responsibility on public expenditure.
This tendency has been confirmed by the most recent provisions, which further hindered and delayed the spending capacity of Italian LGs. In 2014 and 2016 the central government reinforced in fact its (already strong) supervision and constraining approach: municipal procedures and deadlines for
approving the municipal budgets must be now aligned to the State timeline, and local expenditure
must be accounted for on a cash-flow basis instead of on the principle of State transfers.

4.2 Territorial feature

The territorial institutional reforms introduced since 2010 – and culminated with the so-called Delrio
law in 2014 – introduced a major rescaling in the Italian territorial architecture. Three are the core
measures of the reforms: the hollowing of powers of the provinces, the effective introduction of the
Metropolitan cities, the fostering of inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) and of municipal amalgamations (Bolgherini, Lippi and Maset, 2016).

The Delrio Law was the pivot law as for the territorial factor: it systematized and re-launched previous
reforms (or attempts at) on territorial arrangement that had started a decade before (Profeti and Di
Giulio 2016). These previous reforms foresaw a program that had been, until then, only partially
implemented. The Delrio law explicitly provided a framework for regional decision-making and
delegated to the regions the re-shaping of their own multi-level sub-regional governance (Bolgherini,
Lippi and Maset 2016), thus resulting [Baldi and Baldini 2014]: a) explicitly incremental, differently
from the previous rationalist (at least on paper) approach; b) consensus-gathering rather than
efficiency-seeking; c) locally-rooted (rather than nationally) as far as the decision-making process is
concerned. This framework was nonetheless ambiguous, for the regions themselves and the other
local bodies could be either reinforced or weakened according to the single governance choice. In
2015 the Renzi government proposed a Constitutional reform that should integrate the Delrio law and
its territorial reform with, along with other issues, a significant recentralization of legal powers in the
hands of the State. The Constitutional reform eventually failed through a rejection by popular
referendum.

A) The destiny of the second-tier: almost dead but still alive provinces.

The Delrio reform embodied the need to consolidate two principles extensively employed in the
austerity years, especially since 2011: cut of “politicians” costs and budget containment. As for the
provinces, that meant their transformation in indirectly-elected tiers of government and in a reduction
of elected personnel, and in the reallocation of the provinces’ administrative functions and tasks to
other bodies (mainly to regions), respectively (Di Giulio and Profeti 2016). Italian provinces have thus
represented the scapegoat of the whole reform process (Baccetti 2014; Bolgherini and Lippi 2016),
but the hollowing of their powers has left open several possibilities for the reshaping of the Italian
institutional arrangement and for the reallocation of powers and tasks (Bolgherini Di Giulio and Lippi
2018). In the Law Delrio, provinces should in fact be replaced by functional areas (area vasta), whose
definition remained nonetheless blurred, thus leaving room to different interpretation and choices by
the part of the regions. Different strategies were in fact enacted by the Italian regions, according to
their different attitudes towards the provision and their internal allocation of power, as well as to their
continuity/discontinuity approach towards their legacy and to their degree of proactivity/reactivity
(Bolgherini, Lippi and Maset 2016). Hence four different governance approaches emerged: 1)
proactivity/discontinuity: new legislative tools are introduced and regional authorities have a leading
role (Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Apulia, Campania, Abruzzo); 2) proactivity/continuity: the old
institutions are maintained but revisited (Piedmont, Lombardy, Veneto, Molise); 3) reactivity/discontinuity: regional initiatives but no real alternative model is introduced (Latium,
Basilicata, Molise); 4) reactivity/continuity: combining inertia and a reactive stance (Calabria and
Liguria) (ibidem, 363). The extremely complicated provisions concerning the human resources of the
provinces resulted in an even more problematic implementation, aggravated by a context of
decreasing resources (Di Giulio, Falcone and Barbanti 2016).

B) A new chance for metropolitan areas

Although foreseen already in 1990, Metropolitan Cities (MCs) had never seen the light until the law
Delrio, which established their definitive kick-off on January 1, 2015. Ten metropolitan cities (Turin,
Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Bari, Reggio Calabria) entered into force and
totally replaced their relevant provinces as for tasks and functions. Although the approval of the
Statutes (IdF 2014) and the election of the new bodies was quite differentiated among the regions, the implementation of this long-awaited institutions was quite rapid (Citroni, Falcone and Galanti 2016). Although to a lesser extent than regions, also some MCs lagged behind (namely Venice and Reggio Calabria) while others started operating very quickly.

Three issues are now crucial for the further development of these new institutions and for the Italian local government’s trajectory: A) The contrasting territorial stances, mostly between capital cities and their peripheries or minor cities in the same MC, and the internal friction due to different party affiliation of the MCs’ representatives. Both were initially restrained in order to let the new institutions start functioning. Nonetheless, due to no in-depth discussion on the MC’s borders (eventually different from those of the pre-existing provinces) took place, some municipalities - especially those either at the external borders or included in already existing cross-provincial functional areas with the territories of an MC – are now pressing for being included in the administrative borders of an MC. B) The rules for the election of the MC’s presidents. Those MC with more than one million inhabitants could choose to introduce a direct election. This is likely to trigger internal political and party conflicts as well as a potential contrast with the relevant region, due to the size and the legitimacy power that the MC and its president would acquire. C) The institutional activity of most MCs, started in a quite impetuous and unexpected measure (ibidem) in the first two years, seems to have already declined and to have left room to internal conflicts and to frictions with the relevant regions.

4.3 Upscaling and Transcaling relaunched: IMC and amalgamation
The number of Italian municipalities runs since decades around 8,000, being the issue of municipal fragmentation shared with most of the States belonging to the Napoleonic tradition. Italian governments never addressed the number of municipalities directly as a problem. In the frame of the global crisis, however, territorial policy dramatically changed: consolidation measures (defragmentation) entered the national policy agenda (Bolgherini, Casula and Marotta 2018a). Italian Parliament introduced in 2010 the compulsory joint management of municipal basic tasks (gestione associata obbligatoria - CJM) for small municipalities, forcing them to co-manage their basic functions with other municipalities through conventions or municipal unions (MUs). In the following years several other provisions either better specified those joined tasks or coupled them with austerity and rationalization measures (Bolgherini and Dallara 2018). In 2014 the Delrio Law confirmed CJM but provided a further push towards the Municipal Unions (MUs) and the municipal amalgamations, with a new targeted intervention and a coercive approach of the national policymaker (Bolgherini, Casula and Marotta 2018a). As for the MUs, the Delrio Law leaves member municipalities free of choosing their partners, the duration of the cooperation, and the tasks they want to share and in which form but it also entitles Regions with important margins of decision on this matter (Bolgherini, Lippi and Maset 2016). As for amalgamations, this Law both displays a greater range of financial incentives, and introduces organizational simplifications. That hinders a proactive role of local government, which have merely to comply with the norms. The recent reform aims in fact to a renewed predominance of the State upon small municipalities and upon their managing of their own basic functions (Bolgherini 2014; 2016).

After the rejection of the Constitutional reform by popular referendum in December 2016 a stalemate occurred. The CJM has been postponed several times thus hindering a full implementation and triggering a series of resistances (Bolgherini, Casula and Marotta 2018b) by the side of municipal actors. Amalgamations are growing but are still limited in numbers and an overall skepticism on a coming-soon comprehensive reform directed to fill the gaps left by the Law Delrio’s policy design is steadily growing.

4.3 Political factor: The local career paths

Traditional studies (Page and Goldsmith 1987; Page 1991; Goldsmith and Page 2010) consider Italy as an example of political localism, where local actors may have a direct and powerful access to political resources and to the national level. In the period of the legislative process of the Law Delrio and of the then failed Constitutional reform, these traditional features seem to have showed a peculiar feature: a particularly strong influence of the local level politicians in the national arena. Already present in the
early 1990s when the alleged transition to the so-called Second Republic took place emerged, the influence of the local level on the national seems to have regained momentum. This is visible when looking at the different career paths of politicians, switching from the local to the national level. Multi-level political career patterns are a consolidated strand of literature aiming at explaining the movements of political careers across territorial levels. Three career paths (Borchert 2011) have been widely applied to empirical cases: the unidirectional path from one level to another depending on the perceived hierarchy of political offices (usually bottom-up with the national level reputed the most attractive by politicians but theoretically possible also top-down towards the local posts); the alternative path, with no clear hierarchy but with low interchange among levels: who chooses one level is likely to spend his/her whole career there; the integrated career path where no clear hierarchy is present but instead movements across levels are frequent.

As for Italy, some recent studies have further investigated this topic, linking it to the institutional change of the 90s and to personalization of politics (Tronconi and Verzichelli 2016) and party change (Grimaldi and Vercesi 2016). Data on the regional level show that the “alternative careers pattern includes now a minority of career paths. Second, this figure is now almost equal to the percentage of national politicians opting for the regional chief executive office. (...) Also the integrated career pattern is more frequent at regional level than it is at municipal and provincial level (...). Third, newcomers can and do use the office of regional president as a springboard to national politics much more often than it happens in the other levels” (Tronconi and Verzichelli 2016, 17). Local level and in particular regional level are thus increasingly been perceived as resourceful and desirable for career paths. Some preliminary data have been gathered with the aim of testing if, parallel to the institutional reform phase, a different trend in the career paths of politicians could be detected. These data seem nonetheless to confirm the general trend of mixed careers paths with no significant difference between the 1990-2010 period and the 2010-today (that corresponding to the attempts to reform the institutional setting). Notwithstanding these data, it is undeniable that, at least from a mass media point of view, local politicians in this last phase became prominent at the national level, thus reinforcing the political access’ element (former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and former Minister Graziano Delrio, both former mayors in medium-large cities, being the most emblematic examples).

5. Discussion

By looking at Table 3, some further shifts within the Italian hybrid zone may however be discussed by comparing the starting points to the current situation after the last 2012-2017 reform wave. The functional feature changed significantly. Regulatory governance still shows permanent fragmentation and a persistent ambiguity, although since 2012 consolidation measures have been introduced favouring company concentration and reducing territorial fragmentation by merging local delivering units. In the period under scrutiny a new legislation limited the options for municipalities, introduced more controls and fostered the PPP arrangements in an overall attempt to rationalize and simplify the local services’ landscape, although without a definite design (Citroni et al., 2017). Recent change displays that incremental readjustments by limitations and standards tried to push toward a reinforced regulatory governance approach. Fiscal autonomy, in its turn, has been depressed from a recentralization trend, which started a decade ago and skyrocketed with the global crisis, and it is still strongly threatened (Citroni, Lippi and Profeti, 2018). The partial recovering occurred since 2012 is continuously challenged by recentralization-driven cutbacks and by financial and general State supervision. The degree of freedom for municipalities and provinces has thus overall decreased during the austerity years and, due to the salience of cost containment measures, fiscal autonomy ended up to gather under its umbrella all other meanings of local autonomy.

The territorial feature shows a more mixed evidence. A joined process of upscaling and transcaling took place at the same time, in particular since 2014 with the approval of the Law Delrio. This process partly got stuck due to the failure of the Constitutional reform in 2016, which had to complete the territorial reform. Inter-municipal cooperation is enhanced, amalgamation is lukewarmly starting, and in general territorial consolidation is strongly pursued. The choice to opt for IMC instead of amalgamation has now changed: both consolidation tools are used simultaneously.
Although there is an evident continuity with the traditional post-Napoleonic pattern concerning IMC, defragmentation and functional rescaling are both pursued, thus providing a new evidence on the traditional Italian transcaling pattern.

Finally, the political feature shows a certain continuity with the past: the mixed career paths and the importance of local politics are in fact confirmed and even reinforced. This analysis ratified the claims of the most recent literature on this topic as far as the Italian case is concerned: a general trend toward mixed careers paths (from the local level to the regional and national level and the other way round) is to be detected. However, no significant difference in the career paths can be appreciated between the 1990-2010 period and the 2010-today years. Nonetheless, a growing prominence at the regional or national level of local level politicians was to be detected, mainly due to the reform promoters (former mayors like ex PM Matteo Renzi and ex Minister for regional affairs Graziano Delrio) and to a generalized “new local wave” in the public debate. The access to the national level from the local level thus confirms to be strong and politically-marked (Page and Goldsmith 1987; 2010) with a hype in the core years of the reforms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Starting point (Hybrid zone since the 90s until 2012)</th>
<th>End point (Current hybrid zone)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>Mixed allocation of functions</td>
<td>Unaltered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Weak and layered regulatory governance</td>
<td>Regulatory governance, still fragmented but reinforcing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong financial autonomy</td>
<td>Reduced autonomy (only partially recovered but still under threat of recentralization and austerity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Territorial</td>
<td>Small-sized municipalities</td>
<td>Increasing amalgamations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeble attempts to territorial/functional reforms (upscaling and transcaling)</td>
<td>Relaunching of transcaling, upscaling and metropolitan areas (although without a clear direction and many doubts about the second tier's future development)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Forms of deliberative democracy</td>
<td>Unaltered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong mayors (directly elected)</td>
<td>Unaltered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political access</td>
<td>Still strong with a peak in the reform years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ compilation.

6. Conclusion: Hybrid zone between Divergence and Convergence

This paper explored the Italian case and its last local government’s reform wave (2012-2017), through the lens of the three constitutive features (functional, territorial and political), which are considered crucial in shaping the local government pattern and in influencing the reform agenda in each country. For each of them, empirical evidence has been collected by trying to detect the reform trajectory which characterized this phase. The findings discussed in the previous sections allow us to put some provisional remarks about the second Italian trajectory. The second Italian trajectory is zigzagging, pointing sometimes towards the elements of a pattern, sometimes towards those of another, and thus where ambiguities and contradictions do exist and overlap. The reform trajectory is ambiguous and may lead the local government pattern into hybrid zones where the reforms’ results may turn out to be incoherent, contradictory or piecemeal in respect to consolidated and straight local government patterns.

What about the CEN pattern where Italy is traditionally assigned to? Aim of this paper was also that of contributing to the debate on local government patterns. The findings showed that hybrid zones may
often occur and that it is not outrageous to claim that static patterns are empirically rare. Static patterns are more rare than changing patterns as well as than changes IN the pattern (Bolgherini, Di Giulio and Lippi 2018).

In this light the Italian case should not be considered as one of permanent failure or of non-compliance, but that of a persisting hybrid zone, where diverging and converging evidence from and towards to the traditionally assigned pattern (and other ones) co-exists. The analysis of more than a quarter of century and the evidence from the last reform period let us argue that the Italian evolution is intrinsically and permanently hybrid.

True, the evidence on the functional aspect seems to partially confirm the limited autonomy that the Napoleonic model entails. Nonetheless, on the one side, local discretion seems to have shrunk even more (divergence), and regulatory governance seems to have increased (convergence towards the Nordic pattern). As for the territorial aspect, the divergence in respect to the past is remarkable (see table 3), although a convergence toward another pattern (again the Nordic, e.g. as for amalgamations and consolidation) is too recent to be assessed, and at the same time a certain continuity with the CEN pattern is still present (e.g. still high municipal fragmentation). The future of second-tier will perhaps decide where the trajectory will point next. Instead, as far as the political factor is concerned, the analysis of multilevel political career patterns confirmed that Italy still belongs to the CEN patterns, with a remarkable role of political localism.

Italian local government’s constitutive features are therefore definitely reshaping, in particular since the austerity years and the territorial reforms of the 2012-2017 phase. Whether this reshaping will turn out to be a convergence toward the Nordic European pattern (Kuhlmann 2017, 5) remains to be seen. As well, if it will definitely abandon the CEN pattern (it has been shown how Italy is since long only a ‘moderate CEN’) is also to be seen, but in all cases, it will not converge toward another already consolidated pattern. It is not to exclude that the persisting hybrid zone could be its lasting feature, and the future connotation of the Italian pattern. Far from considering Italy as an outlier, we repute that its institutional situation has to be acknowledged as a physiological condition. Hybrid zones are empirically frequent cases (Behnke and Benz 2009), while fixed and definitive pattern are detectable only in a limited number of countries. Instead, numerous countries gravitate around ambiguous and transitional, almost permanently provisional, arrangements. We claim that Italy is a case in point in this cluster of country, as a laboratory where many zigzags may be observed at the same time, without a once-for-all finish line. Zigzagging trajectories and a moving hybrid zone seems to be the dominant Italian feature, with further inner differentiation among regions. Be it as it may, this does mean that the current arrangement, as a result of a incremental and layered trajectory is not a side effect, but it can be assumed as permanent.

To sum up, this paper examined the case of the Italian trajectory of reform of local government, which led to a permanent hybrid zone (instead of to a different but already defined pattern) through a zigzagging trajectory. A hybrid zone where continuities with the traditional arrangement of CEN pattern are still detectable (convergence) but where also diverging paths have been taken. Evidence from the last period of reforms, taken together with the past trajectories, confirm that the CEN pattern has been hybridized and that the reform trajectories zigzag between different patterns and mixed solutions. As such, we claim that those hybrid zones and trajectories are not outliers or a case of failure, but a possible permanent condition.

Starting from here, a further double step of research can follow: on the one hand, traditional and static pictures of local government pattern might want to be rethought; on the other hand, the Italian case may provide an emblematic case for comparison for other countries with zigzagging trajectory, for more evidence about hybrid zones and on their consistency with potentially consolidated country patterns.
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