

Trends in local democracy in Belgium

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Content

- Local government in Belgium : an overview
- Europeanisation of local government in Belgium
- Four current trends and evolutions :
 - Scale, an ongoing debate
 - Inter-municipal cooperation
 - Decentralization and local government (subsidiarity)
 - SDG's and local government

Local government in Belgium

- Belgium, federal country with a three-tier structure:
 - National federal government
 - Regional government
 - Local government
- Local government
 - 581 cities and municipalities
 - 300 in Flanders
 - 262 in Wallonia
 - 19 in the Brussels capital region
 - 10 provinces

Europeanisation of local government (I)

- Europeanization of local government: mutual interdependencies between local authorities and the EU
- Top-down:
 - Implementation of EU rules (regulations, directives) and policy (via funding programmes) (LEADER, regional development, ...)
- Bottom-up:
 - Participation in European networks (e.g. EUROCITIES, Eurometropolis); contribute to lobbying (e.g. CEMR); adjust organisation (e.g. funding officers)

Europeanisation of local government (II)

- Belgium in the 1990's (De Rynck, 1997): 'Far Away from Brussels'
 - Poorly informed – not aware of influence – little organisational adaptation & involvement
- Current situation (Verhelst, 2019): general but careful upward trend
 - Interest & awareness are growing – Some (pro)active cities – EU affairs gained in importance for local authorities – Europeanisation is mainly driven by projects, networks and funding opportunities (local action groups, inter-municipal organised – LEADER)

Scale as part of a broader reform strategy

- Flemish government wants to strengthen the local government level
- Scale as part of that reform agenda
- Stimulation of voluntary amalgamations
 - By financial incentives
 - By legal assistance
- 15 municipalities took the step in 2018, 7 new municipalities
- From 308 to 300
- What in the future?

The future of inter-municipal cooperation

- A complex inter-municipal landscape
- About 65 inter-municipal structures per municipality
- In all policy fields: regional development, waste collection, energy supply, etc.
- In 2017 several scandals about allowances payed to local politicians
- Result:
 - Inter-municipal arrangements questioned more and more
 - More transparency and efficiency are needed

Decentralisation

- A core European value and an ongoing trend in local government in Belgium
- According to literature: 'decentralisation may enhance the quality and efficiency of service provision through improved governance and resource allocation' (European Commission, 2016)
- Linked to the principle of subsidiarity
- Debate on extra competences towards the local government level
- Although... limited results so far
- Regional government is very restraint in transferring competences

Sustainable development goals

- Wave of protest to call for action against climate change
- National government and international climate agreements don't seem to help, or are seen as 'not enough'
- Call for action on the local level
- Implementation of the SDG's in local policy
- SDG's are used to structure local policy plans

