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# The Capacity of Local Governments in Europe

## Autonomy, Responsibilities and Reforms

Sabine Kuhlmann  
Benoît Paul Dumas  
Moritz Heuberger



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# CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Comparison of the Role of Local Governments in Europe: Autonomy, Self-Government, Local Democracy</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1	<i>Comparison of European Administrative Models</i>	9
2.2	<i>Conceptual Framework: Dimensions for Comparing Local Governments' Capacities</i>	14
2.3	<i>Local Autonomy</i>	16
2.4	<i>Functional Responsibilities</i>	20
2.5	<i>Intergovernmental Relations</i>	35
2.6	<i>Territorial Profile</i>	38
2.7	<i>Political Profile</i>	42
2.8	<i>Conclusion</i>	47
	<i>Bibliography</i>	49
<b>3</b>	<b>Local Government Finances</b>	<b>57</b>
3.1	<i>European Models of Local Government Finance: Funding Sources and Volume of Expenditures</i>	59
3.2	<i>Role of European Structural Funds</i>	64
3.3	<i>Conclusion</i>	69
	<i>Bibliography</i>	70

<b>4</b>	<b>Reform Trends</b>	73
4.1	<i>Reform Discourses in Recent Decades</i>	74
4.2	<i>Recentralisation and Decentralisation</i>	76
4.3	<i>Territorial Reform</i>	82
4.4	<i>New Public Management and Privatisation</i>	88
4.5	<i>Post-New Public Management: Remunicipalisation</i>	94
4.6	<i>Conclusion: Diffusion and Convergence of Reform Models</i>	96
	<i>Bibliography</i>	99
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	107
	<i>Bibliography</i>	117
	<b>Annex</b>	119



# LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	Proportion of public employees by sector in percent. (Source: Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019, p. 129) (with further evidence))	21
Fig. 2.2	Proportion of local government revenues (left) and expenditures (right) as a percentage of total government revenue/expenditure, 2016. (Source: OECD (2017))	24
Fig. 2.3	Proportion of local government expenditures to total government expenditure in percent, over time. (Source: OECD (2017))	25
Fig. 2.4	Provision of places in nursing homes in Hungary, 2006–2012. (Source: Horváth (2016, p. 196) (with further evidence))	31
Fig. 2.5	Proportion of expenditure by task and by sector as a percentage of total expenditure (2013). (Source: Kuhlmann and Wollmann (2019, p. 134) (with further evidence))	32
Fig. 3.1	Share of local government expenditure in GDP in percent. (Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2017))	65
Fig. 3.2	Share of ERDF and CF funding of total public investment. (Source: European Commission (2019a, b))	66
Fig. 3.3	Share of SUD funding in total national ERDF funding. (Source: European Commission (2017, p. 9))	68

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Administrative profiles in Europe	10
Table 2.2	Territorial structures of municipalities in Europe	41
Table 2.3	Subnational administrative levels in selected countries	43
Table 2.4	Index of mayoral strength in European countries	46
Table 3.1	Fiscal autonomy of local governments in Europe	60
Table 4.1	Territorial reform patterns in Europe	83



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** The strengthening of the transformative powers of cities is a crucial challenge which local governments will have to face in the future. This means that local governments must have sufficient capacity to fulfil their tasks in terms of promoting the common good. The effectiveness and quality of public service provision depend largely on the capacity of local governments to act and manage their own affairs. In the European context, this capacity is very differently developed and organised. Against this background, the present study compares local self-government in Europe. This study is based on relevant data for measuring local autonomy and performance, as well as on in-depth analyses of local development in selected countries (France, Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, and the United Kingdom). Each of these countries is a typical representative of a different country profile in the European context, based on different models and traditions of local public administration.

**Keywords** Local government • Comparative public administration • Europe • Local autonomy

The strengthening of the transformative powers of cities is a crucial challenge which local governments will have to face in the future. This means that local governments must have sufficient capacity to fulfil their tasks in terms of promoting the common good. The effectiveness and quality of public service provision depend largely on the capacity of local governments to act and manage their own affairs. In the European context, this capacity is very differently developed and organised. Against this background, the present study compares local self-government in Europe. This study is based on relevant data for measuring local autonomy and performance, as well as on in-depth analyses of local development in selected countries (France, Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, and the United Kingdom). Each of these countries is a typical representative of a different country profile in the European context, based on different models and traditions of local public administration.

From a comparative perspective, a very heterogeneous picture emerges with regard to the role of local governments in the administrative structure, which also reveals shifts and changes over time. While the role of local governments in the multilevel system has been clearly upgraded and strengthened, *inter alia*, France, Italy, Sweden, and, in recent decades, the English local governments have been weakened considerably since the 1980s. In Hungary, after an initial strengthening in the wake of the early transformation and decentralisation process, local government autonomy has now been increasingly curtailed. This is, however, not the case in other Eastern European countries, such as Poland, which still has comparatively strong and increasingly autonomous local governments. Although the trend towards the upgrading and affirmation of local government still dominates in Europe—as demonstrated by decentralisation reforms, the transfer of responsibilities and the increase in the degree of local autonomy over the past 25 years—there are also countertrends in some countries (England, Hungary, and partly Southern Europe) that are weakening the role of local governments. However, they represent rather exceptional cases within an overall ‘local government-friendly’ trend in Europe.

The strengthening of local self-government in some European countries, especially in the Nordic administrative model (e.g. Sweden), can be interpreted as a continuation of a traditional development path in which local governments have increasingly represented a significant level of sub-national policymaking and service delivery. In these countries, local-oriented policies and reforms generally encounter fertile ground in terms of administrative culture. By contrast, the upgrading of local governments