

Territorial reforms in Europe – A cross-national comparative perspective

Administrative maps of European countries are very far from stability. They change as a result of reforms, usually leading to creation of larger, but sometimes also to splits into smaller units. In our project we focus on the lowest (municipal) tier, which is the closest to everyday life of average citizen. In most of Europe municipalities provide several basic services such as water and sewage provision, waste management, maintenance of local roads, and in some European countries also primary education, basic health care and social assistance.

During recent years we have noted increased interest in territorial amalgamation reforms (merger smaller municipalities into larger units) in many European countries. After 1990 such reforms have been implemented in 20 different countries. On the other side, at the beginning of 1990s in several countries of Central and Eastern Europe we could observe the opposite process – bottom-up initiated numerous cases of splits of existing municipalities, which led to territorial fragmentation. It was often a reaction for compulsory and implemented in the non-democratic manner earlier reforms leading to liquidation of small municipalities in 1970s and 1980s. Altogether, in Europe there are only a few countries in which number of municipalities after 1990 has not changed. In Poland the intensity of territorial changes on a municipal level has been relatively low, but number of municipalities after 1990 has increased by over 100. After 1995 there were 18 splits of municipalities (the last one was in 2010 – separation of Jaśliska from Dukla, next two splits were almost implemented in 2016 – the government approval for splits of Supraśl and Kamiénica was withdrawn at last minute before the reform). There were also (more rare) cases of mergers of municipalities (suburban town Wesoła became part of Warsaw in 2002, in 2015 the city of Zielona Góra merged with surrounding rural local government).

The aim of the project is to analyse changes on European map of municipalities and assessment of outcomes of those trends. In particular we will try to answer two questions:

- What have been the arguments used by proponents of territorial reforms? What have been expectations of those arguing for amalgamation and those arguing for splits of existing municipalities?
- Have those expectations been actually met by reality in cases where the reform was implemented?

Typically it is assumed that creation of larger local governments should bring saving (especially on local administration) and improve capacity of local governments to provide more complicated tasks and services (e.g. because larger municipalities would be able to employ better qualified and specialized staff). The defense of small municipalities is usually based on arguments related to local democracy. They refer to the right of small local communities to autonomy, less bureaucratic small local governments, more direct relationship between citizen and local authorities, and citizens' satisfaction and interest in local public affairs, which are usually higher in small local jurisdictions. But there are also empirical studies which challenge those typical claims.

The research in the project would concern Poland, but also other European countries. The experts' survey in conducted with specialists from ca. 20 European countries will be part of the project. We will also summarize the existing knowledge from earlier academic studies of consequences of territorial reforms. We plan also detail analysis of splits of municipalities in Poland and one of the other countries of East-Central Europe.

Our foreign partners participating in the project originate from Denmark, and Netherlands – countries which currently or recently have implemented territorial reforms and in which research on reform processes and impacts of reforms are highly advanced both in terms of developed methodologies and collected empirical material.