

Conference

Decentralisation Policies: Reshuffling the Scene

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International scientific conference *Decentralisation Policies: Reshuffling the Scene* took place in the Centre for Advanced Academic Studies (CAAS) of the University of Zagreb in Dubrovnik, Croatia from 7 to 10 May 2015. More than 40 participants – professors and academic researchers from 19 countries (including the USA, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, and many European countries) presented 35 papers.

The conference was organized by the Institute of Public Administration, Croatia, under the auspices of the International Political Science Association (IPSA), and with the support from the IPSA Research Committee (RC) 5 Comparative Studies on Local Government and Politics and RC 32 Public Policy and Administration. The conference was also supported by the Study Centre for Public Administration and Public Finance, Faculty of Law in Zagreb, Croatia.

Research goals of the Conference were to explore values, triggers, components, and challenges of recently undertaken decentralisation policies in a number of countries, their short- and long-term effects, as well as to discuss general and country specific prerequisites for and expectations of decentralisation processes. Research topics were mostly related to the territorial restructuring, functional and fiscal reforms of local and regional self-government in multi-level governance settings, legitimacy and efficiency of decentralisation as a democratisation tool, and evaluation of decentralisation reforms.

The Conference started on May 7, with PhD school. Eight papers with outline of doctoral students' respective PhD theses were presented. Pro-

fessors Colin Copus and Fred A. Lazin served as discussants. During the next three days, twelve sessions were held. At the opening session, introduced by Professor Ivan Koprić and assistant professor Vedran Đulabić, Croatian Minister of Public Administration Arsen Bauk gave a speech in which he addressed the importance of the decentralisation reforms in Croatia.

In the first panel, *Decentralization Policies and Processes*, the presenters were professor Jeffrey Sellers (University of South Carolina, USA), who explained the role of civic organizations in decentralized governance; professor Roberto Moreno Espinosa (International Academy of Politico-Administrative Studies & Future Studies, IAPAS, Mexico), who emphasized the urgent need for municipal reform in Mexico as an inevitable means of true democratisation of the country; as well as Dr Zoltán Grünhut and Dr Ákos Bodor (Institute for Regional Studies, CERS HAS, Pécs, Hungary), who presented their empirical research on values that can be derived from political elites' rhetoric regarding local self-government.

Second panel *Decentralisation as Democratisation* introduced papers from the UK, South Africa and Croatia. Professor Colin Copus (De Montfort University, Leicester, UK) addressed the current debate of pros and cons for change of the constitutional status of English local government towards (maximum) devolution. Professor Robert Cameron (University of Cape Town, South Africa) pointed out that South Africa may have administrative decentralisation (deconcentration) and fiscal decentralisation but falls short on political decentralisation (devolution). Dr Jasmina Džinić (Faculty of Law, Zagreb) analysed citizen participation in the creation of local budgets and the potential of participatory budgeting to improve public governance in Croatian local self-government units.

Panel 3 *Decentralisation and Quality of Public Services* started with a presentation by professor Mauricio Covarrubias (National Autonomous University of Mexico) on fragmentation of the educational system in Mexico, problems of coordination between actions of the different levels of government and ways in which decentralization advantages can be undermined by shortcomings in their design and implementation. Professors Aleksandra Maksimovska and Aleksandar Stojkov (Law Faculty Iustinianus Primus, University Ss. Ciril and Metodij, Skopje, FYR Macedonia) presented the concept of social responsiveness of local governments, aiming to explore and explain the openness of local governments to the needs of diverse social groups, particularly to different ethnicities. Dr Romina Manojlović (Faculty of Law, Zagreb) presented her empirical rese-

arch on whether the size of Croatian local units (number of civil servants and budget) affects performance and quality measurement.

Panel 4 named *Territorial Restructuring Policies* began with the research of Dr Daniel Bochsler (NCCR Democracy, University of Zurich, Switzerland), explaining political preferences of the citizens on ethno-political issues based on structural and institutional variables (socio-economic context, ethnic structure of the population, decentralisation, territorial autonomy) and how preferences are translated into cooperation or conflict. Dr Mihovil Škarica (Faculty of Law, Zagreb) underlined trends, potentials, and problems of inter-municipal cooperation of local units, and a concept of integrated model of inter-municipal cooperation as a means of achieving a consolidated system of territorial (local) self-government. Professor Đulabić presented the first half of his joint paper with Dr Dario Čepo (Faculty of Law, Zagreb) regarding the debate on the introduction of five regions and the position of 20 counties in Croatia. The paper dealt with the question of how to ensure preservation of the existing county identities and their not being absorbed by the wider regions that should replace the counties.

During Panel 5 *Local Capacities and Decentralisation*, associate professor Gordana Marčetić (Faculty of Law, Zagreb) presented her longitudinal analysis of the number of local servants in local administrative bodies in Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as on training programs for local servants conducted so far in Croatia, pointing out low personal capacities and proposing the establishment of an independent agency for HPD for subnational government level in Croatia. Associate professor Mirko Klarić (Faculty of Law, University of Split, Croatia) explained the current capacity of sub-municipal government in Croatia for overtaking some municipal public tasks, which is very weak, but it could be improved should there be a larger political and fiscal decentralization preceded by territorial reorganization of local self-government.

Panel 6 named *Regionalism in South Europe* was opened by Dr Čepo, presenting the second part of the joint paper with Vedran Đulabić, concerning comparative analysis of subregional representations in Scotland, Wales and Poland, with reference to Croatia, where a new institutional framework of subregional representation was proposed, as to preserve subregional identities of specific subregions (currently counties), and to pave the way for their amalgamation in a larger region. By analysing historical and current trends in territorial governance in Hungary, professor Illona Palne Kovacs (Institute for Regional Studies CERS HAS, Pécs,

Hungary) pointed out the fact of strong and expanding central state and local government system as an “almost empty bottle” due to strong veto players against decentralisation (parties, central bureaucracy, even the local elite). Dr. Anka Kekez Koštro (Faculty of Political Science, Zagreb) and Enes Ćerimagić (NGO Green Action, Zagreb) presented their joint paper prepared with Tomislav Domes and Tomislav Tomašević. Their analysis showed that functional and fiscal decentralization of the Croatian water services is not as present in practice as it is in documents, and water services are primarily managed via hierarchy and bureaucratic management complemented by private concessions on wastewater treatment service.

Panel 7 *Urban Areas and Decentralisation* began by the presentation of dr. Michele Breuillard (University of Lille, France) on (im)possibilites of the French local government rationalization due to intricate structure of powers at the local level, and large discrepancies in the size and population density in communes and departments. Possibilities lie in shifting trends from communal to regional power as the basis of local government system and balance: mandatory metropolitan councils in 14 bigger urban areas since 2014 and the introduction of 13 instead of 22 regions since January 2016. Assistant professor Dejan Vučetić (Faculty of Law, University of Niš, Serbia) examined how to achieve equal development of all city units for effective city governance – by expanding city units’ autonomy or by strengthening cooperation mechanisms. Focusing on the legal position of inner city units in Central European cities, he provided a comprehensive analysis of administration and competences of city units in Serbian cities, whose legal nature and position are not sufficiently defined either in the Serbian legal theory or in local government regulations.

Within Panel 8, *Decentralisation in Times of Austerity*, assistant professor Katarzyna Szmigiel-Rawska (Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies, University of Warsaw, Poland) presented results of the research on inter-municipal cooperation in Poland: scale of financial transfers in relation to the size of budgets and the subject of financial transfers concerning cooperation between budgets of local governments. The role of financial transfers is only 2.3% of total budget expenditures but it is systematically increasing, with largest share related to the transport services (local public transport and roads), social assistance and education. Associate professor Primož Pevcin (Faculty of Administration, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) portrayed the effects of the current economic and fiscal crisis on the public sector in Slovenia. Austerity measures have shown evidence of double-loop learning feedback mechanism in subnational governments that

have learned to cooperate more intensively in order to survive the crisis. Public-sector employment decreased due to the cutback measures, and the average wage in the public sector decreased, leading to wage compression. Further consolidation measures are still needed.

Panel 9 *Central-Local Relations* Dr Koenraad De Ceuninck presented the paper written with Professor Herwig Reynaert (Centre for Local Politics, Ghent University, Belgium) focusing on the enlargement of the administrative scale of Flemish municipalities, which is explicitly put forward as a major priority of the current Flemish policy and discussing some foreign examples of recent scale reforms. Flemish policy on amalgamations is now linked to decentralization towards the local authorities, but strengthening of their administrative power can be done only through a multiple approach to legal framework in which local governments operate, their funding, their (political) composition, and their geographical location. Professor Pekka Kettunen (Abo Akademi University, Finland) discussed the balance between centralization and decentralization on an example of healthcare services in Scandinavian countries. Pros and cons of decentralization are often filtered through politics, zealots, elections, and private interests. A researcher has to try to be objective and consider the issue from a number of angles, but scientific means to find evidence-based solutions are scarce. Furthermore, local governments are not the same; urban centres have much better chances to take the responsibility than small rural municipalities. Healthcare services are not merely a professional issue; they have a political nature, too. Healthcare reform seems to pave the way for a territorial reform in general. Assistant professor Friederike Bundschuh-Rieseneder (Institute for Public Law, State and Administrative Science, University of Innsbruck, Austria) discussed some contrary tendencies of decentralization and centralization in the federal state of Austria. Public administration reform in Austria, which has recently taken place, reflects the transition from a welfare state to a lean state, although the decentralisation of public task fulfilment focuses on citizens' needs and on motivating public administration. A fair balance between decentralisation, which should guarantee the best performance delivery, and central co-operation and coherence must be found.

The summary panel was introduced by Dr Carlo Panara (Liverpool John Moores University, UK) who accentuated multi-level governance (MLG) as a key feature of all Western democracies. It is an important issue on the EU agenda promoting legitimate governance, both at the national and EU levels, as it is a correct implementation of EU policy and appropriate involvement of the subnational authorities. Professor Jill L. Tao (Global

College of Law, Commerce and Public Affairs, Incheon National University, South Korea) examined attempts at decentralizing the implementation of environmental policies within two culturally different contexts: the northeast sector of the People's Republic of China and the heavy industrial bases in South Korea. Although both countries have histories of highly centralized decision-making and somewhat brutal suppression of local attempts to exercise autonomy of any kind, these countries have moved toward more decentralized processes for implementing certain kinds of policies. The hypothesis that Chinese local officials are far more likely to see other local officials as sources of information as to how decentralization should take place than their Korean counterparts is tested. Professor Ivan Koprić analysed local "muddled" governance in SEE countries (Western Balkans) which experience unclear governance ideas, with rather slow governance improvements. The biggest issues are territorial fragmentation, timid administrative modernisation and hesitating decentralisation in a politicized and authoritarian culture. In search of a new legitimacy of local government, new forms of citizen participation should be encouraged and clear roles of local government should be determined. He advocated for more "regionalism", urban units as drivers of development, as well as for more professionalism in local administration.

The Conference was concluded by professors Fred A. Lazin and Ivan Koprić who thanked all the presenters and the Conference Organizing Committee for their effort and welcomed the Conference presenters with the opportunity to submit the final versions of their papers for publication in the international scientific journal Croatian and Comparative Public Administration, published quarterly by the Institute for Public Administration.

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