

Chapter 1

Introduction

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Europe has in 2015 a population of nearly 743 million inhabitants, of which around 74 % live in urban areas, according to the 2014 United Nations World Urbanization Prospects. While the total population in the continent is projected to decrease in the next decades, expected to fall to 709 million in 2050, the same number of inhabitants the continent had in 1985, it will continue to urbanize, and as a consequence, the proportion of urban population is expected to reach 82 % in 2050.¹ In 2015, Europe has 3 megacities, urban agglomerations with more than 10 million inhabitants, 2 urban agglomerations between 5 and 10 million inhabitants, and 48 between 1 and 5 million inhabitants, a number expected to increase up to 55 in 2050, according to the same United Nations source. These urban patterns and trends differ from country to country and among regions within the European continent and confront local governments in Europe, in different ways, with new challenges and opportunities in the governance of cities.

The book aims to discuss innovative reforms and practices developed and experimented in critical areas of urban governance in the last decades, in part associated with the impact of the European Union policies on its member states, or associated with the transition to democracy, which in some southern European countries occurred in the 1970s and in central, eastern and southeast Europe in the

¹The proportion of urban population in the world is 54 % in 2015 and is projected to reach 66.4 % in 2050 (UN-World Urbanization Prospects. The 2014 Revision. New York: United Nations). These figures used here refer to the aggregated data considered as Europe in the United Nations World Urbanization Prospects.

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early 1990s, in this case as part of the political process that followed the fall of the socialist political bloc in eastern and central Europe. The book deals primarily with the concepts of local government and urban governance. The notion of local government is used in the book to refer subnational tiers of government, whose nature varies from country to country, a variation that reflects the idiosyncrasy of the national political processes and the prevailing public administration cultures as well. We distinguish basically two models of local government, associated one with deconcentration and the other with decentralization. The first corresponds to the local administration of the state, which continues to be an important stakeholder in urban governance in these countries; the second refers the true form of local government, which we term local self-government, with political, administrative, and financial autonomy and with directly elected boards, among other characteristics. Across the book, local self-government is referred by a variety of terms that better reflect the specific national context of the case examined in each chapter and the professional background of each author. All these different terms refer the notion of local self-government, and we use this and local government as synonymous throughout the book. The other concept is urban governance. By this, we refer the mode of governing cities that is emerging as a result of the move from the traditional hierarchical public administration to a mode of governing based increasingly on a network of public and nonpublic entities, of which the state, both central government and the local administration of the state, as well as local self-government, are still the key stakeholders. Again, the exact configuration of these institutional architectures varies from country to country, and this is reflected somehow in the variety of terms used across the book. Important to retain is the fact that in none of the chapters in the book is the governing of urban areas seen as being carried out solely by traditional hierarchical public administration.

The methodology used varies between chapters but the book uses in most of its twelve chapters a qualitative case study approach, relying on different types of data, collected in official policy reports, plans, background policy documents, in national and international legislation, in statistical publications, in previous academic research, or through interviews, public opinion surveys, external observation, or in participatory workshops. If it is true that the small number of cases examined may be seen as a limitation of the book, affecting its external validity, it is also true that the qualitative approach applied in these case studies allowed the identification of new relationships and the exploration of new perspectives, and at the same time a deeper knowledge of each individual case studied.

The book has 12 chapters, including this Introduction, and is organized into three parts. The first part—“Crisis, reform and innovation in local government”—has four chapters focused on the development of local self-government in Europe. The first three chapters illustrate well two processes responsible for the most important changes experienced by local self-government in Europe in the last half century, the transition to democracy in southern Europe in the mid-1970s and in central and eastern Europe in the early 1990s, as well as the impacts of the 2008 global economic and financial crisis in the restructuration of local self-government systems in a large number of European countries. In Chap. 2, “Political and Administrative

Decentralization in Portugal: Four Decades of Democratic Local Self-Government,” the book examines the main changes in the process of political and administrative decentralization and in the development of local self-government in Portugal since the transition to democracy in 1974, seen within the wider institutional changes that affected European countries, in particular since Portugal joined the European Community in 1986. The chapter focuses, in particular, the period during which Portugal was under the Memorandum of Understanding on specific economic policy conditionality, and the proposals of the XXI Government (2015–2019) for the reform of local government, which are expected to revert part of the policy options taken during the recent economic adjustment program (2011–2014/2015). Ján Buček in Chap. 3—“Why and When Countries Implement Local Public Administration Reforms: A Long-Term View of Reform Dynamics in Slovakia 1990–2015”—explores the conditions behind reforms and adaptations experienced by local self-government in Slovakia after the transition to democracy in 1989 and argues that reforms in public administration, including in local government, required a highly complex set of conditions to be successful. The chapter on Portugal illustrates the main institutional changes that countries in southern Europe experienced since the mid-1970s, as part of the transition from authoritarian political regimes to democracy, as well as in reaction to the 2008 global economic and financial crisis. The chapter on Slovakia does the same for the transition to democracy experienced by countries in central and eastern Europe, constituting these two transitions processes the most important political shifts in the last half century in Europe.

The next chapter “Local Self-Government in Hungary: The Impact of Crisis,” by Adrián Fábíán, discusses the impact of the 2008 economic and financial crisis on local self-government in Hungary and argues that local government was already affected by important financial constraints, which were not originated by the 2008 crisis, as this only increased the problems that already existed. The chapter examines also the reforms implemented in response to these problems, and the results achieved until 2015. The last chapter in this first part deals with specific institutional changes in local and regional government in southern Europe. Chapter 5, “Local Government Innovation in Italy: Impact on Urban and Regional Planning with a focus on the Milanese context,” written by Renzo Riboldazzi, examines the impacts of the 2014 reform of local government in Italy and gives particular attention to the regional governance and planning innovations, taking Milan as a case study for an in-depth analysis of this recent local government reform process.

The second part of the book—“EU Policies, the Urban Agenda and Local Governance”—has five chapters that deal each with a specific issue within the European Union (EU) urban policies or urban agenda. In the first of these four chapters, “Urban dimension of the European policies and the new EU Urban Agenda in Croatia,” Dana Dobrić examines policies and standards for good urban governance adopted by the European Union and by the Council of Europe, giving special attention to local development policies and to the role given to cities in their implementation and ends with an analysis of the Croatian case as an example of the challenges and opportunities confronting cities in Europe within the emerging Europe 2020 governance framework. The following chapter, “The relationship

between the European Commission and Local Governments through European Urban Initiatives: constraints and solidarities,” by Oussama Kharchi, puts into perspective the European urban initiatives, in order to understand the changes in the relations between the European Commission and cities in Europe and how it impacted on urban governance. In Chap. 8, “Mega-events and new patterns of cooperation: the European Capitals of Culture,” Ágnes Németh examines the opportunities for social capital mobilization in European cities in the context of the European Capital of Culture program, launched 30 years ago, based on a comparison of two cases, Pécs, in Hungary, and Turku, in Finland. The author explores how this EU program facilitated and changed inter-organizational cooperation and networking among cultural and creative producers in these cities, pointing out the importance of knowledge and support networks in the field of creative industries and the role of these large-scale cultural events in the formation and on the sustainability of such networks, so important for urban governance. Anna Trono, Maria Chiara Zerbi, and Valentina Castronuovo examine, in Chap. 9, “Urban Regeneration and Local Governance in Italy. Three emblematic cases,” the role of urban renewal policies, in particular those associated with the EU Urban Initiative program, in the regeneration of urban areas, based on three case studies: Lecce and Taranto, in the south of Italy, and Milan, in the north. As the authors show, there are sharp differences in the results achieved so far due to the differences in management capacity of local administrations and public and private partners as well. Finally, in Chap. 10, “Involving citizens in the reuse and regeneration of urban peripheral spaces,” Beniamino Murgante and co-authors examine an experience of participatory reactivation of abandoned or underused spaces and buildings in a neighborhood in Potenza, Basilicata, Italy. This participatory planning experience shows how relatively simple and low-cost urban regeneration interventions carried out with citizens engagement can have better results than highly expensive and complex traditional urban regeneration programs.

The third part of the book—“Citizen Participation in Local Self-Government”—comprises two chapters and explores a key component in urban governance: citizen participation in local government decision-making. The two chapters deal with citizen participation in local elections. Lilita Seimuskane, Inga Vilka, and Edgars Brekis in Chap. 11 “Assessment of socio-economic status relevance for Latvian electoral participation” explore the factors that affect the level of electoral participation in Latvia, the choice to vote and the motivation to participate in elections pointing for the existence of a correlation between socio-economic status and participation in local government elections in Latvia, concluding that while socio-economic factors are more clearly correlated with participation in the election to the European Parliament, in the local elections the contextual factor, specific of each municipality, has an important influence in the electoral outcome. The authors compare the electoral participation in the local elections of 2013 with the elections to the European Parliament in 2014. The following chapter “Making informed citizens in local direct democracy. What part does their government perform?,” written by Werner Pleschberger, discusses the issue of a voter’s competence in direct democracy processes at the level of local government decision-making processes,

based on an analysis and comparison of three cases: the Austrian cities of Vienna and Bregenz and the city of Los Angeles in the USA. Included in the discussion are the practical ways of how local government can inform the voter on the fiscal implications of specific measures they would have to decide on the ballot, concluding that Los Angeles has a high developed approach of voter information and Vienna the poorest regulation and practice of voter information, with the city of Bregenz representing a moderate example.

Changes in the local self-government system and reforms in local self-government policies, as those examined in these essays show, require the combination of numerous factors and highly complex incentives. The evidence collected suggests that the success of local government reforms is dependent on national conditions, namely the administrative culture, the pattern of central–local relationships, the political and economic conditions, the existence of a balanced public finance system, among other factors, and international influences as well, namely through the European Union and Council of Europe. Besides the influence of these two layers, local government reform and policy practices are highly dependent on and influenced by local contexts, namely by the differences in management capacity of local government. The evidence provided in these essays shows that the road for reform and the outcomes tend to differ substantially from country to country, or among cities, since national and local contexts are determinant factors in the functioning of local government, as the cases of Portugal, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, or Slovakia illustrate. European integration and the implementation of EU policies in different sectors have been responsible for the implementation of structural reforms in the local government systems of member states, a process that is now starting to be fully experienced in the new EU members, as the case of Croatia illustrates. The recognition of cities as a relevant place for the European Union intervention reshaped the relationships between the EU and local government in each member state, as well as the institutional models and practices of urban governance, as some of these chapters show. The importance of local self-government is so critical that failure in its reform risks to have serious negative consequences for the community, as the analysis of the recent reform of local government in Italy, or those in Portugal, Slovakia, and Hungary point out.

In sum, by providing this informed and updated view of recent institutional reforms and the key challenges confronting the governance of cities in Europe, the book will be of interest for students and researchers in the broad field of urban studies, in particular for all those working on urban governance in European countries and for policy makers in central and in local government as well.