Between national constraints and the legacies of the past: explaining variations in inter-municipal cooperation in Italian regions

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ABSTRACT
Despite the historical tradition of inter-municipal cooperation in several regions, the Italian policy maker has for the first time decided to oblige small municipalities to co-manage their basic functions. Although controversial because of its overly top-down logic, this provision is driving a “new” era of inter-municipal cooperation in Italian regions: around 70% of Italian municipalities must choose between a municipal union and a covenant in order to manage these functions. Regions can direct their municipalities towards different forms of inter-municipal cooperation with the use of monetary incentives, regulatory restrictions or persuasion. The paper develops an analytic framework to explore this process in two regional cases. The analysis highlights that despite the national constraints, the different regional strategies are increasingly conditioned by the legacies of the past.

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Inter-municipal cooperation; Italian regions; regional public policies; path dependence

INTRODUCTION
In recent years, Italian policy-makers launched several austerity policies to rationalize local government. One of the most controversial of these is obliging small municipalities to manage local services cooperatively, due to the historic Italian tradition of local self-government. Its first provision (decree-law No. 78/2010), extended a number of times, is that municipalities must compulsorily manage their basic functions in municipal unions (MUs) or in covenants, each representing a different degree of institutionalization. While the former are enti locali (local entities) with their own political and technical bodies, the latter are simple formal agreements for managing one or more services.

Following Hulst and Van Montfort (2007, p. 12), public and private actors in the context of inter-municipal cooperation are assumed to be goal-oriented and rational, pursuing their interests, using their powers to achieve their goals. In the current Italian inter-municipal cooperation context, local administrators’ main objectives are to conform to regional/national regulatory...
obligations to avoid external substitute intervention, and to take advantage of the substantial funding, especially the regional ones.

Therefore, using public funding and regulatory obligations, regional policy-makers may choose, or not, a ‘dirigist’ role for inter-municipal cooperation. They can decide if and how to reorganize and remap local administrative boundaries with two choices:

1. to use these policy instruments selectively, inducing municipalities to respect regional standards; or
2. not to predict specific financial and regulatory constraints, inducing municipalities to choose freely their optimal government dimension.

My research question is therefore how is the historical heritage, compounded over the years in the single regional contexts, influencing regional choices in terms of inter-municipal cooperation? To answer this question, a hypothesis has been developed:

_Hypothesis: Although the rhetoric of change is often characterized by the adoption of a new and an unusual policy style for the single context, the recent regional financial support policies are still influenced by the legacies of the past or, more specifically, by the ways in which inter-municipal cooperation has been historically understood by regional and local actors._

This hypothesis has been tested by analysing two regions (Emilia-Romagna and Veneto). These regions are historically characterized by heterogeneous traditions of local government, policy styles, and political and cultural connotations, and where structured regional support policy and diffuse inter-municipal cooperation were already present before the institutional reforms.

**WHAT DOES (NOT) THE LITERATURE EXPLAIN?**

Inter-municipal cooperation in Europe is not a recent issue (Norton, 1994), with early forms dating back several decades. Today, inter-municipal cooperation goes beyond aiming to manage services more efficiently, but under austerity it becomes a condition for its survival, with small Italian municipalities no longer able to guarantee provision for citizens (Bolgherini, 2015, p. 84).

In various literatures the role of regions in inter-municipal cooperation, as well as what Gjertsen (2014) terms ‘the study of regions as governance arenas’ (p. 1926), is traditionally understudied. In their comparative analysis of eight countries, Hulst and Van Montfort (2007) identified the basic features of European inter-municipal cooperation. However, their analysis stops short of recognizing possible roles played by intermediate governmental tiers, such as regions, and regional impact on the direction and coordination of cooperation processes (Baldini, Bolgherini, Dallara, & Mosca, 2009, p. 26).

In addition, the political science literature on inter-municipal cooperation has emphasized the methodological difficulties of building a common comparative framework (Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007; Swianiewicz, 2010) able to interpret different outcomes in Europe. The reasons are connected to the different national institutional frameworks, and, consequently, with the different role played by national and sub-national actors in this issue.

**HOW DOES ONE STUDY INTER-MUNICIPAL COOPERATION IN ITALIAN REGIONS?**

Institutionalizing inter-municipal cooperation in Italian regions has been a long-term process demanding detailed historical analysis of regional and municipality actors’ behaviours and beliefs.
Analysis should therefore combine long-term historical analysis with analysis of the governmental culture embedded within the individual regional contexts. The methodology that combines these two effectively is contextual comparison (cf. Messina, 2012), and differs from decontextualized statistical data in proposing a methodological option for social research that, in political science, refers to Rokkan's comparative approach (Messina, 2005, p. 108). Using jointly institutional and cultural variables and with the creation of a rigorous theoretical framework enables an understanding of continuities and changes in the modalities of regional interventions. The method involves in-depth analysis of the political cultures they are related to, the culture of government and the administrative practices established therein.

In line with this, a comparative analytical framework was developed that specifically focused on the gaps identified in the previous section. Given the complexity of the matter and the non-analogous regional competencies of the different states, a common theoretical framework for explaining and comparing the different dimensions of inter-municipal cooperation in Italian regions was built.

This analytical framework is presented in Figure 1. The independent variables are the regional competence in this matter, regional regulatory framework and incentive structures. The dependent variable is represented by the different dimensions of cooperation and its outcomes (see Hulst & Van Montfort, 2007). The previously mentioned regional contextual factors and policy legacies are two intervening variables; including them helps improve understanding of the actual regional incentive structures and the consequent dimensions of inter-municipal cooperation, regarding services' distribution.

Variables were selected to focus on both political–institutional and socio-cultural factors alongside more general geomorphological and demographic characteristics of the two regions. These variables allow showing both how they differ in terms of demographic size and the presence of small and very small municipalities, as well as how such features have influenced the role played by the region in making strategic choices in organizing collective municipality services. But not all these characteristics can be explained in terms of the political homogeneity amongst individual municipalities, nor by the degree to which the regional actors are interventionist or not in their approach towards territorial reorganization.

Figure 1. The building of an analytical framework. Dashed arrows indicate a weak relation; X is the independent variable; Y is the dependent variable; and Z is the intervening variable.
To analyse the regional regulatory framework and incentive structures, three steps in reforms were considered (Casula, 2014):

1. The spontaneous launch of the first policies for the promotion of cooperative management since 1990s.
2. The beginning of the regionalization process for the use of state incentives from the Conferenza Stato-Regioni-EELL in 2006.
3. New measures adopted to cope with the recent economic crisis and national requirements.

Twenty-five semi-structured interviews with local and regional institutional and socio-economic actors, as well as regional rules, deeds and resolutions (from the 1970s up to present), were used for the analysis of the independent variables.

This qualitative analysis was used to build two indexes. The first index related to policy innovation and considers regional capacity to elaborate policy instruments suitable for the regional context in a proactive or reactive way with respect to national provisions. A cross-temporal approach was used to build the index following the principles of contextual comparison. The second index related to the role played by the region in (re)mapping regional governance, whether using monetary incentives, regulatory restrictions or persuasion. To produce each index, five variables were considered and assigned a score ranging from 0 to 2, referring to absent (0), weak (1) and strong involvement (2). An additional half-point was assigned to cases where a partial implementation of the regulatory framework was identified (Table 1). In other words, the logic

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**Figure 2.** Map of inter-municipal cooperation in Veneto.  
*Source: Regione Veneto – Direzione Enti locali, Persone Giuridiche e Controllo Atti, 2013.*
was: weak involvement and partial implementation, 0.5; weak involvement and total implementation, 1.0; strong involvement and partial implementation, 1.5; and strong involvement and total implementation, 2.0.

**INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE STUDIES: ANALYSING THE REGIONAL INTERVENIENT VARIABLES**

Both Emilia-Romagna and Veneto are located within the so-called Terza Italia (‘Third Italy’) (Trigilia, 1986), a region which in contrast to Italy’s underdeveloped Mezzogiorno and its industrialized North had a development model based on small enterprises and industrial districts. As Bordandini and Cartocci (2014) note, ‘on the level of political culture, the Third Italy was described as characterized by high levels of social integration and political participation, voting loyalty, strong work ethic, and strong local identity’ (p. 50). Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1985) described both Veneto and Emilia-Romagna as two regions with high levels of social capital, with the highest levels have been historically registered in the latter.

There were also several regional differences, most substantively related to the political differences between the two regions: Veneto had structured its local politics around Catholic institutions...
In addition, as indicated by Messina (2012), different local government cultures clearly co-exist together with different regional policy styles and attitudes towards territorial reorganization. The attitude in Emilia-Romagna was more interventionist reflecting a different interpretation of the notion of governance. These governance networks reflected several factors, a strong regional authority in Emilia-Romagna, a strong local community network in Veneto, a greater political homogeneity among the ‘red municipalities’ and a more mature administrative federalism in Emilia-Romagna. In the latter, the use of forms of inter-municipal cooperation with a higher level of institutionalization was already common in the 2000s (Casula, 2015). By contrast, the inability of Veneto’s municipalities to create sound territorial networks for service provision can be understood as a consequence of the local tradition of administrative individualism, i.e. self-administration of local public services (Messina, 2012).

**Figure 3.** Map of the municipal unions (MUs) in Emilia-Romagna (December 2015).

Source: Regione Emilia-Romagna – Servizio Riordino, Sviluppo istituzionale e territoriale. Retrieved October 20, 2016, [http://autonomie.regione.emilia-romagna.it/unioni-di-comuni/avvisi/copy_of_Unioniefunzioniconferitedic2015.pdf](http://autonomie.regione.emilia-romagna.it/unioni-di-comuni/avvisi/copy_of_Unioniefunzioniconferitedic2015.pdf/).

and associative networks, whilst Emilia-Romagna was centred around the Communist Party and local authorities.

**WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM THE EMPIRICAL CASES?: ANALYSING HOW INDEPENDENT VARIABLES INFLUENCE THE DEPENDENT ONES**

The empirical analysis showed how Veneto region’s traditional and non-interventionist policy style and the marked administrative individualism of its municipalities resulted in a lack of radical change in the logics of local government. The latest Law of the Veneto Region No. 18/2012 proclaims that inter-municipal cooperation was intended to be a turning point in the traditional regulation adopted by the region. However, this study sought to get beyond this rhetoric of change and explore the actual implementation and the resistances on the part of the municipalities to a
policy strategy contrary to Venetian policy-makers’ traditional approach. In particular, the strategies of covenants or small MUs continue to be the most preferred by Veneto’s municipalities, despite the reality of actually jeopardizing the sustainability of the institutional model, especially in relation to the presence of several overlapping areas (Figure 2).

The laissez-faire policy adopted by Veneto region from the early 1990s to 2012 gave each community a wide autonomy in the selection of the cooperative forms they considered most suitable, using nothing but flexible forms of inter-municipal cooperation unable to guarantee some form of supra-municipal political governance. Moreover, the region’s recent choice to continue promoting cooperative practices with regional funding (besides MUs) can be explained by the legacies established here and the need to mediate constantly between national obligations and a continuing and marked parochialism among Venetian municipalities. Therefore, the actual situation regarding inter-municipal cooperation in Veneto must be understood considering the region’s laissez-faire policy since the 1990s, as well as the historical administrative individualism of the municipalities.

By contrast, Emilia-Romagna demonstrates that the practices historically established here have produced a stable environment to take on the new challenges imposed by national legislation. The model of inter-municipal cooperation in this region has been characterized in these years by a pronounced proactive approach and a great programming capacity.

Over the years, Emilia-Romagna Region has realized several structured and targeted interventions that can be defined as almost ‘dirigist’. Without recourse to coercive instruments, using the available tools, Emilia-Romagna could redefine the whole regional supra-municipal governance within two decades. In 2015, it contained 46 MUs – mainly of large dimensions and with overlapping optimal areas for the management of the public services and/or local socio-health districts (Figure 3). Since the early 1990s, the policy trend in Emilia-Romagna has been to the gradual elimination of funding to cooperative forms using simple structures and corresponding exclusively to a technical and economic view of the cooperative process (e.g., covenants). Policy preference was given to cooperative forms with intermediate structures, such as inter-municipal associations, the latter being a form not originally envisaged in national legislation and specifically developed by Emilia-Romagna. Finally, starting from the mid-2000s (almost a decade before the last national directions), incentives were assigned only to cooperative forms with complex structures (e.g., MUs) more capable of ensuring a political view of the cooperative process.
Comparing simultaneously the role played by the regions in (re)mapping regional governance as well as their policy innovations, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto present several differences (Table 1 and Figure 4). Whilst the former provided and completely implemented policies in order to induce municipalities to (re)map their boundaries, the latter only partially provided the policies and it implemented them more partially. Therefore, Veneto’s role has historically been non-interventionist in this issue, limiting itself to be reactive with respect to national constraints. In contrast, Emilia-Romagna has anticipated several national provisions over the years since the 2000s, both elaborating new alternative solutions against them to be adapted to its regional context, and annually modifying its own regulatory framework.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has made evident that the recent regional strategies in terms of inter-municipal cooperation were strongly influenced by the legacies of the past. Moreover, attempting to bridge the gaps present in the European literature on inter-municipal cooperation, it contributes to the debate on the ability of the meso-level of governance to influence the traits of inter-municipal cooperation in its territories in a regionalized state.

Second, given the complexity of the matter and the different regional competencies of the different states, the framework developed has shown its value for explaining and comparing the different dimensions of inter-municipal cooperation in Italian regions. It permits exploring how regions were supporting the process of inter-municipal cooperation in a historical and cross-temporal analysis perspective. Consequently, this framework could be used also for other regionalized European countries. Obviously, it should take into account possible differences in the national regulatory frameworks, as well as the different roles played by the meso-levels of governance in the issue of inter-municipal cooperation.

Finally, the study contributes to the academic and policy debates on inter-municipal cooperation by showing that actual territorial reorganization processes – even where triggered by the same factor (austerity) – may not have similar outcomes. Both regional context and path dependency matter and may result in divergent outcomes in different regional settings.

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NOTES

1. With fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, or 3,000 if they are or were part of a mountain community.
2. It provided several criteria that regions should respect in order to have access to national funding and, consequently, to assign them to the associative forms they requested.
3. I am aware that this approach could have certain weaknesses. The latter are conditioned by the attempt to appoint quantitative values following research conducted through documental analysis and in-depth interviews. Nevertheless, it is consolidated in explaining institutional and constituent policies (Gualmini, 2008).

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