Divergent pathways or a joint quest for policy integration? A comparative analysis of recent regional governance approaches in the Netherlands and Flanders

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1. Introduction

The search for effective ways to establish intergovernmental cooperation is considered an evergreen in the public administration literature. Globally, nation states are looking for ways to facilitate intergovernmental coordination within the existing institutional set-up, since they are confronted with a multitude of societal challenges, often referred to as 'wicked problems' (Head 2008), leading to increased levels of complexity and (inter-)dependency (Ongaro et al., 2010; Mc Guire & Silvia 2010). A way that government tries to respond to this phenomenon is through collaborative arrangements between different governmental units and partnerships, leading to hybrid forms of cooperation in which new equilibria are formed between public and private actors (Pierre & Peters 2005; Vakkuri & Johanson 2020).

Within this context of an increasing need for collaboration and partnerships, the 'region' is put forward as an appropriate level to address these complex societal challenges. Regions are seen as a hub for identifying and realizing diverse societal objectives, as well as for creating interactions between different actors and policy levels (Groenleer 2016; Pike et al., 2017). Existing tiers of government are considered inadequate to accommodate region-specific challenges, creating a need to develop new regional steering mechanisms (Rodríguez-Pose 2013). Within this context, we witness how countries deal in various ways with organizing intergovernmental cooperation, especially at the regional level, given these increasingly complex societal challenges.

Within the literature a lot of attention goes to the creation and development of regional governance within specific nation-states and what the driving forces behind are behind the latter (Brennetot 2021; Plüss 2015; Eckardt 2015). However, how nation-states develop diverse trajectories on regional governance and what the drivers are behind these different logics per national setting are aspects that are often overlooked and still raise a lot of questions. Therefore, we witness a need for more research on which differences are at play in how countries deal with intergovernmental cooperation and regional governance, and in particular how these differences between countries regarding the regional level can be explained.

In this paper, we examine the way in which regional governance is variously given shape in particular national contexts, exploring the determining conditions for the latter and examining what consequences this entails both for central government and regional actors. Two interesting cases in this regard can be found in the Netherlands and Flanders (Belgium) where central government has recently opted for a different role, responsibility and relationship towards the region. In the Netherlands, this role took concrete shape through the development of so-called 'Region Deals'. The Region Deals are an example of regional governance founded on a rather functional basis, also similar to other national trajectories and processes (such as energy regions, mobility regions,...). We contrast this approach with how regional dynamics are also at play within the region of Flanders (Belgium). In this context we witness recently fixed regions for regional intergovernmental cooperation being defined as part of a central 'regionalization' reform and that reflect rather a territorial perspective on the region.

This article is structured as follows. To answer the research questions we develop a regional governance model (section 2) through which cooperation between the state and the region can be understood and which we use to analyze practices of the two studied regional reforms. After specifying the used methodological approach (section 3), we then apply the developed framework for our case description and then analyze the conditional terms at play within both cases (section 4). We finally conclude by answering the research question, elaborating on the both the contributions and limitations of the study and outline an agenda for future research (section 5).

2. Conceptual framework

Regions: combing a relational and territorial perspective

The contemporary literature conceptualizes regions and regional development via different approaches (Pike et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Pose 2013). We explore below the territorial versus the relational perspective on regions and then determine our own stance regarding these positions.

From a territorial perspective, the region is conceived as a 'bounded spatial unit' (Jonas 2012), with a focus on borders and being defined as a 'hard' territorial body in space. Examples of this types of regions can be found in existing intermediary government tiers in different European countries, such as departments in France, the German Länder and the provinces in the Netherlands and Belgium. This approach is contrasted in literature with the relational region perspective, where relationships, flows and networks are central (Savitch and Vogel 2000). From this point of view, the region is seen as an entity defined by networks and social relations, through which complex patterns of connectedness and flows are being established on a supralocal scale. The boundaries formed are therefore an outcome of the formal and informal networks and connections developed.

Although both positions have proven their merits within the literature, they have also been criticized as too one-sided, with insufficient justice being done to hybrid and complex forms of arrangements (Goodwin 2013; Allen & Cochrane 2007). We consequently approach the region as a complex interplay of both existing local, central and intermediary actors, which are in close relation to civil society and wider social dynamics, building on both elements of the relational and territorial approach.

Regional governance: between a strategic and structural approach

Within our hybrid perspective on regions , we take a perspective on regional governance that focuses on the resources mobilized among actors within regions, paying attention to the capacity and purpose of regional governance. Capacity deals with how actors organize decision-making, allocate resources, and eventually act on regional issues, beyond administrative, sectoral, and functional borders. Purpose refers to the societal objectives or agenda that actors seek to achieve regarding a regional problem (Foster & Barnes 2012). Our understanding of regional governance in this sense builds also on urban regime theory and more specifically the way it has been developed in the literature to study regional regimes and governance arrangements (Hamilton 2012). From this angle, we look at regional governance as a way of achieving predetermined goals, coordinating actions and making strategic decisions within a regional setting (Groenleer 2016).

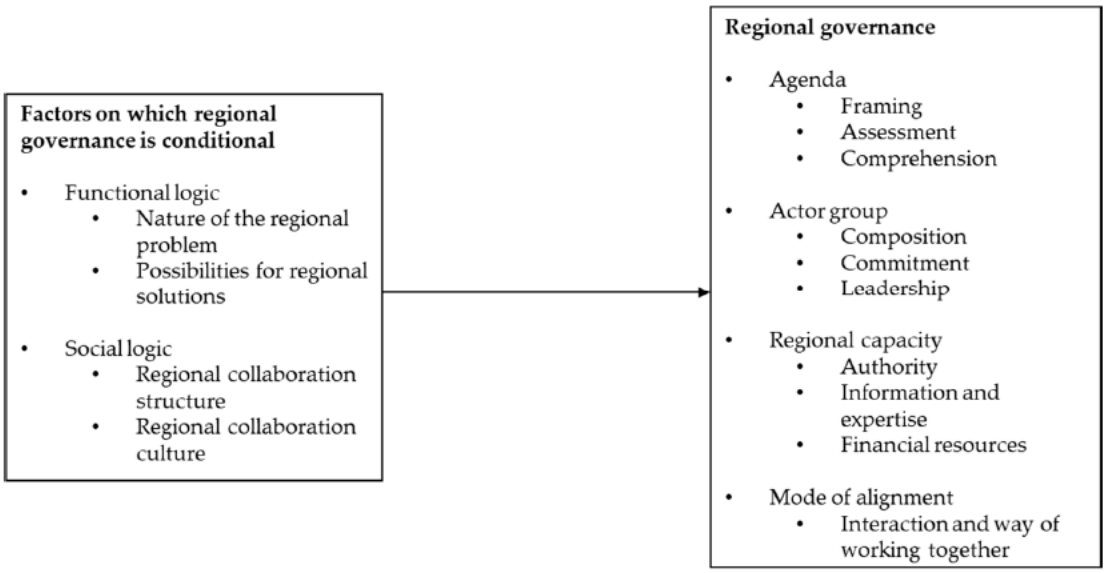
We build our analysis of regional governance from the following building blocks developed within the regime approach: agenda, actor group, regional capacity and mode of alignment. The first dimension, agenda, addresses the problem set being addressed at the regional level. Here the focus lies on its framing, understanding and support among the actors involved. Second, actor group refers to the regional coalition formed around an agenda, where the composition, level of commitment and leadership taken up here play an important role. Regional capacity as the third dimension refers to the resources mobilized among the actors to implement the established agenda. Elements that can contribute to this are staff capacity, financial resources and expertise building. The final dimension refers to the cooperation mode that includes how the actors interact and work together to implement a given regional agenda.

Variation in perspectives on the region and regional governance approaches: explanatory factors

The regional regime approach as stated above provides clear tools for unraveling different types of governance arrangements, shedding light on their various components, but offers little insight into the underlying driving mechanisms and conditions on which regional governance depends. When it comes to explaining differences in the development and functioning of regions, we additionally identify several conditional factors for regional governance in literature.

Research on multi-level governance postulates several conditions that must be met for the development of successful regional governance. Hooghe and Marks (2016) highlight in this respect regional issue differentiation and variation in collaborative cultures as element on which regional governance is dependent. Stated differently, regional governance is related to both the functional logic of scale and the social logic of community. One the one hand, the functional logic of scale relates to the specific characteristics of the regional problem one identifies and the solution directions one puts forward. On the other hand, the social logic of community relates to the social networks in which one is active and the regional culture and identity that is created this way. Ansell and Gash (2008) demonstrated that both trust between actors and imbalances in resources or power input can have an important impact on the functioning of collaborative governance arrangements and can lead to different development trajectories per case or region.

Based on our literature review and also expanding the scope of previously used analysis frameworks (De Leeuw & Groenleer 2018), we approach regional governance as an interplay of the following factors.



Figuur 1: Regional governance conceptual framework (De Leeuw & Groenleer (2018))

3. Methodology

Comparative method

We make use of a subnational comparative method in this research. Snyder (2001) distinguishes two strategies for subnational analysis, being within-nation and between-nation comparisons. It is argued that comparing similar subnational units across distinct national units may be a (more) powerful strategy for making valid causal inferences than comparing national units, since a strong a degree of control over cultural and historical conditions can be achieved this way. Also, subnational comparative research can help to build theories that explain the dynamic interconnections among the levels of a politico-administrative system (Giraudy et al., 2019).

In this research within-nation and between nation strategies of subnational analysis are combined. We make both a comparison between the selected regional reform programs in the Netherlands and Flanders, but also pay attention to differences between regions within each of the selected reforms. The use of this method can enable us to focus on the functional and social factors which, as we already stated, play a determining role in the actual functioning of regional governance arrangements (Hooghe & Marks 2016).

Case selection

Given the hybrid perspective on regions that we adopt in this research, paying attention to both the relational and territorial dimensions of regions and our focus on how and why various nation states deal with regions as a tool for intergovernmental cooperation in different ways, we select as cases the Region Deal program in the Netherlands on the one hand and the regionalization reform within Flanders on the other.

Both cases can be considered as critical cases of regional reform in public administration in recent years within both areas (Yin 2018), being set up by central government during the past legislatures and involving both local and central government actors. Also, both cases concern reforms that are not limited to a few parts of the country, but cover a sufficiently wide area to also detect variation in dynamics between different regions within the same case.

Data collection

Different data collection and analysis techniques were used within this research.

For the Dutch case study, in addition to the analysis of policy documents, semi-structured interviews were conducted. A topic list in the form of written-out questions based on our conceptual framework was used for this purpose. A total of 5 interviews were conducted, consulting both stakeholders from central government and practitioners from the regions.

In addition, insights were developed within a series of ‘governance labs’ that were used as an additional input for our analysis (Groenleer et al., 2022) . Between 2019 and 2022, a consortium of external parties (of which one of the authors is a part), commissioned by the Dutch central government, provided a trajectory focused on the governance of Region Deals. As part of this trajectory, the consortium set up the Region Deal Lab Governance. The RD Lab Governance provided a safe and confidential setting where regions and the state could learn with and from each other.

The objective of the lab was threefold. First, to gather knowledge together (in the form of lessons and insights) about what works (and what doesn't) and why exactly, in terms of the governance of Region Deals. Second objective was to adapt and improve governance arrangements that have already been developed, or to design new arrangements. Finally, the aim was also to identify 'principles' for effective and legitimate governance, in particular for the Region Deals, but also more generally for regional cooperation and cooperation between region and state. The RD Lab was action- and design-oriented:

after jointly diagnosing and defining governance challenges, regions and the state worked together on new governance arrangements themselves, within regions and between regions and the state.

Regarding the Flemish case of the regionalization reform, the data was collected both from an analysis of policy documents and legislation, interviews with key stakeholders but also from a strong involvement as action researchers in the reform process. The researchers took part as experts both at local level and the Flemish level of the central departments involved in this reform via the Policy Research Centre on Governmental Innovation (see later) and also as members of expert teams brought together to reflect and advise the Flemish government regarding regional reform trends and developments in general.

4. Analysis

a. case description

1) Regional Governance dynamics in the Netherlands

As we argued, an exemplary case of how regions are currently being developed in the Netherlands can be found in the recently established Region Deal program (2017-2021 and 2022-2025). We outline below the approach and structure of the program.

The promise of the region as the place to realize social tasks and broad welfare is now widely being recognized in the Netherlands. For the Rutte-III government (2017-2021), the region in various forms frequently formed the starting point for policy. Various social objectives converge in the region. These include familiar challenges in the field of economy, mobility, employment and education, but also new (transition) challenges in the field of quality of life, care and welfare, climate adaptation and energy transition. In the region, the challenges facing the Netherlands become tangible, but opportunities also arise, depending on the specific circumstances and possibilities of the region.

To address region-specific challenges and increase broad welfare, the central government made €950 million available in 2017 for a 'region envelope'. These funds were spent through so-called Region Deals: agreements between the central government, regional governments, companies, knowledge institutions and civil society organizations. During the 2017-2021 government period, 32 Region Deals were concluded between region and national government in 3 rounds (see figure below).

Figuur 2: Region Deals in three rounds (source: Dutch central government)

For a Region Deal to be concluded, a number of criteria had to be met: (a) the challenge had to be multiple in scope, (b) the deal had to contribute to broad welfare, (c) the approach had to be integrated, (d) the deal had to involve cooperation between various parties, (e) the efficiency and effectiveness of the approach had to be guaranteed, and (f) there had to be sufficient implementation power. Another condition that had to be met was (g) that co-financing from the region was brought into the deal in addition to the funding from the central government. That co-financing had to come from public and/or private parties from within the region, depending on what central government had stipulated for each call.

Regions acted as hubs for the deals, not only for identifying and realizing various social tasks and creating broad welfare, but also for interactions between different parties and government tiers. A region in the context of the Region Deals was therefore not a fixed geographical or administrative unit, but an area defined by the actor coalition facing a specific economic, social and/or environmental challenge. The region was therefore formed around the societal challenge, and could be as large as a number of provinces together or as small as a number of neighborhoods in a single municipality.

The initiative for an initial proposal of deal comes from the regional partners (public and private parties), after which the agenda is then worked out in cooperation between the state and the regional actors. A deal-making process thus takes place prior to the conclusion of a deal. The proposal from the regions forms an important impetus for the Deals, but the further elaboration takes place in a consultation phase between the regional parties and the central administrations. For the deployment of funds from the central Region Envelope, the Region Deal and its implementation is assessed by the central government on the basis of efficiency and effectiveness, using a balancing framework that deploys four aspects: content, regional embedding, finances and organization (Lysias 2020).

In the Region Deals, the national government and decentralized authorities work together to tackle regional objectives. Decentralized governments thereby play an important role in the policy-making and implementation of the Deals. This is in line with a more general Dutch trend over the last decade of giving municipalities and provinces more responsibilities for certain policy assignments and tasks (Groenleer & Hendriks 2020). There has been a shift in administrative logic that has ultimately resulted in a more area-oriented and task-oriented approach, with layers of government working closely together to achieve a more integrated approach that is increasingly being used within public administration in the Netherlands (SIFV 2020).

Compared to previous regional policy initiatives, Region Deals have a different division of roles between the national government and decentralized governments. Decentralized governments have a more leading role in defining the task and developing the policy program. As part of this joint approach, the agreed policy program is jointly funded: the financial contribution from the national government is matched with a financial contribution of at least the same size from the regional governments involved.

The basic form of governance that can be distilled within the Region Deals is two-fold, consisting on the one hand a consultation table State-Region and on the other hand of a direction group or core team. Within the State-Region consultation table, the goals to be achieved within the Regio Deal are validated, advice is given regarding the implementation structures to be set up and the way in which feedback and monitoring will be established. The composition of the consultation table is specified in the signed deal text between national government and the region. Secondly, all Regio Deals have a steering group that directs the implementation of the deal. In some cases, an advisory group is also used to assist the core team in setting up the deal and deciding which projects to implement.

2) Regional Governance dynamics in Flanders

As the second case we zoom in on a critical shift in regional governance within the region of Flanders, which revolves around the current regionalization reform process ('regiovorming') and the evolution towards working within fixed 'reference regions'.

The Flemish Coalition Agreement 2019-2024 includes an ambitious passage on regionalization. The agreement aspires to counter administrative burden on the regional level and states the ambition to end up with fewer intermediary structures. The ambition followed up on an earlier mapping exercise of regional structures which identified all forms of cooperation in which municipalities within their provinces were involved. The study resulted in an area covering overview of intermunicipal partnerships, informal forms of cooperation, structures and demarcations. The inventory contained 2,229 forms of cooperation and an average of 68 forms of cooperation were included per Flemish municipalities (De Rynck et al., 2011). The inventory showed the richness of the intermediate level and the multitude of activities taking place here: at the Flemish level, numerous administrations organize initiatives on a regional scale, provinces are active in area-based operations and local governments participate in intermunicipal partnerships, as well as the federal government has its own geographical demarcations.

The ensemble of these dynamics feeds a sense of administrative burden among various actors and leads to several problems at that intermediate level: democratic legitimacy, compartmentalization, insufficient transparency, inefficiency and lack of clarity. The region screening study and the subsequent regionalization reform process aim to address precisely these problems. To achieve greater coherence at the intermediate level the Flemish government wants to evolve towards fixed regions, so called reference regions (see figure below), within which all forms of intermunicipal and supra-local cooperation can be clustered. In addition, it aims to tackle cluttering ('verrommeling') within those regions in order to end up with less structures, fewer mandates, more transparency and an improved decisiveness.

Figuur 3: Delineation of the reference regions in Flanders (source: Flemish government)

Despite the ambition to increasingly concentrate cooperation at the level of reference regions, the Flemish government does not conceive the reference regions as an additional tier of government. They do not form a new formal structure and do not replace the existing provincial administrative level. They are only considered as a coordination level for different forms of intermunicipal and supra-local cooperation. The Flemish government itself will lead by example and aspires to improve its regulatory

framework for inter-municipal cooperation and their own regional structures to align with the reference regions. In addition, Flanders is asking local and provincial governments to align the forms of cooperation in which they are embedded (within the scope of the regionalization reform) to align with the reference regions by 2030.

In terms of political steering, mayors are assigned a central role in the vision of the regionalization reform. They meet each other regularly in a regional mayors' conference, which aims to discuss regional challenges from different policy areas by making cross-sectoral strategic agreements, in order to achieve integrated policy coordination at the regional level. To be successful for the latter, good interaction between the mayor and his local administration is also essential for the democratic legitimacy of regionalization. To achieve this, the regional activity becomes a fixed monthly item on the agenda of the College of Mayor and Aldermen and needs to be placed as well on the agenda of the municipal council at least twice a year.

The general coordination and support of the regionalization reform is taken up by the Flemish Internal Administration Agency, in close coordination with the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) and the Policy Research Centre on Governmental Innovation (a long-term research project funded by the Flemish Government in which some of the authors are involved).

In 2020 the Flemish Government granted the VVSG a subsidy for a 'Regions Lab' for the period 2021-2023. This project aims to work out a development path for regions that do not yet have a long tradition of cooperation, to realize regional breakthrough projects and to offer support to regions that want to rearrange their supra-local space. For mayoral conferences and other regional consultative bodies, the Regions Lab organizes coaching trajectories. Particular attention is paid to the perspective of the individual local government: how does the alignment between local governments and the regional level occur? Good examples, roadmaps and hands-on experiences are shared via this platform. The Regional Lab also supports regional breakthrough projects. Through an open call, regions and sub-regions can apply to participate for the latter. Within the selected regions, local governments, Flemish government agencies, provinces and social actors work together in area coalitions towards breakthroughs, supported by the Lab. This support focuses primarily on topics such as the (inter)administrative process, equalization instruments and inter-administrative agreements.

Finally, the Policy Research Centre on Governmental Innovation also provides scientific support, supervision and evaluation of the regionalization reform. The research center works on a range of instruments that support regional activities, such as cooperation schemes, revenue models, settlement models, scenarios, etc. Also, the research center will evaluate (ad interim) the regionalization reform in 2023 and formulate a number of recommendations for the next Flemish Government regarding the reform.

b. Analysis: components of regional governance

	Netherlands: Region Deals	Flanders: Regionalization reform
Agenda	Framing: Promotion of Broad Welfare	Framing: Reduction of administrative burden
	Assessment: bottom-up agenda setting + deal making process	Assessment: Flemish agenda setting
Actor group	Composition: public + private actors involved	Composition: (mostly) public actors coalitions
	Commitment: voluntary basis of coalition	Commitment: scope of local cooperation agreements imposed by Flemish decree
	Leadership: central administration unit (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations) + other central domain administrations (depending on the agenda)	Leadership: central administration unit (Flemish Internal Administration Agency)
Regional capacity	Resources: co-funding of central government (2017-2022: 950 million €)	Resources: no additional central funding
	Expertise: support of central administration + RD Governance Labs	Expertise: support of central administration, region labs + research support
Mode of Alignement	No predetermined regional cooperation scale	Reference regions as a new framework for policy alignment
	Consultation body State-Region as interaction forum, basis of equal partnership	Mayors' conference as central coordination platform within the region

c. **Analysis: conditions for regional governance**

1. Functional Logic: Regional Issue Differentiation

Drawing on the regional governance literature, we expect regional governance to be dependent on the functional logic of scale. Therefore, the characteristics of the problem identified at the regional level and the available solutions are likely to have an effect on the resulting governance arrangements.

We note that the regional agenda setting clearly differs between the two cases and consequently also leads to quite different kinds of governance arrangements.

Within the Dutch case, we witness that regions are developed as an instrument to address multiple, integrated policy objectives that arise within multiple domains, as evidenced by the central agenda & focus on so-called 'broad welfare'. The Region Deal approach was specifically shaped and influenced by a series of recommendations formulated in research reports in preparation for the government formation. In particular, one report of the Study Group Public Administration *('Maak verschil')* played an important role here, since it stressed the need for providing regional customization and improving cooperation between different parties within regional-government programs as a clear recommendation (SOB 2016). These insights resulted throughout the government negotiations, in which certain political actors also wanted to respond to specific regional bottlenecks, in concrete passages on Region Deals in the coalition agreement. The government states in the latter the ambition to adress regional opportunities by providing close cooperation with the regions by concluding 'deals'

with decentralized authorities. To this end, a (quite substantial) region envelope at the central level was earmarked during the cabinet period for tackling regional challenges.

Within the Flemish case, we see a somewhat different logic and problem definition at the regional level at play. The starting point for regionalization does not consist of directly addressing multiple societal challenges (such as broad welfare), but addressing the lack of scale coordination within existing regional cooperation arrangements, and more precisely the administrative burden or 'clutter' resulting from the latter. The reform seems to start clearly from a more territorial perspective than the Dutch case, by building on the premise that a unified and more aligned regional scale will lead to more cross-links and policy coordination between existing regional partnerships. The Dutch case rather reflects the regional perspective on regions, where scale and demarcation are the result and outcome of the set regional agenda, the coalition of actors and their mutual relations, and not the other way around. Interestingly, in the Netherlands, attempts have also been made in the past to embed the region more territorially within domestic governance, but various forms of resistance have repeatedly blocked this kind of reforms (Zimmerman et al., 2022). The current more functional approach and the focus on broad prosperity can thus also be understood as an attempt to engage in regional governance without getting caught in fierce administrative and political discussions around public administration redesign.

The differences in regional problem statement are also reflected in the governance arrangements that resulted from both reforms. Within the Dutch Region Deals, cooperation takes place via flexible coordination bodies that are responsive to the dynamics present within regional actor coalitions. The interaction basis between local and central governments is set up from an idea of equal partnership, which also corresponds with the requirement for co-financing, seeking a balanced financial settlement between central government and region. The Flemish regionalization reform clearly starts from a different premise and aspires to regional uniformity by introducing a similar governance structure, composed of regional mayors conferences, throughout the Flemish territory in order to promote a clustering of collaborative efforts. In this way, the ambition is to develop a clear regional unit that can take up a role as a coordination body within the existing intergovernmental administrative landscape, also without questioning the existing tiers of government.

2. Social Logic: Regional Collaboration Structures and Cultures

Besides the functional logic of scale, we expect regional governance to be influenced by the social logic of community. Existing regional collaborative trajectories and a regional culture will influence the type of regional governance that is being established.

We witness in both cases that existing regional collaboration is likely to (strongly) effect the resultant regional governance dynamic in specific regions.

Within the Dutch case we witness quite some pre-existing actor coalitions and partnerships who had already gone through a regional trajectory prior to the region deal, that also served as an important building block for the region deal governance arrangement. For example, in certain regions, such as Eindhoven, triple helix boards and foundations were used as responsible governance bodies for implementing and steering the Region Deals. In these cases, the ‘deal making’ process was also often completed more quickly. As a result, many existing regional programs seem to have received an (additional) financial boost via the Region Deal program. However, a number of regions experienced it as an hurdle to reconcile the existing collaboration in the region with the central requirements of a Region Deal with regard to governance.

Also within the Flemish case, we note that existing partnerships exert a strong influence on the governance model and ambitions put forward in the regionalization reform. Especially regarding the mayors conference model, we observe that a tradition and modus operandi in some regions has already been established before the reform, albeit in other not. These existing practices were an important inspiration source for the central regionalization reform, which acknowledges these formats

and aims to strengthen them. However, in other regions a mayors conference on the scale of reference regions now has to start from scratch, while others already have accumulated decades of experience with the latter. The territorial scale delineation put forward in the regionalization reform therefore does not dismiss the fact that there are important differences in trajectories between regions, that will certainly affect the output of the reform.

5. Conclusions

The region is increasingly highlighted in the literature as a way to address complex societal challenges and to facilitate interaction and coordination between different actors and levels of government. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about how regional governance is developed in specific ways within various national contexts and what factors can explain the differences we observe here between nation-states. This research therefore aspires to contribute to the understanding of how intergovernmental cooperation through regional governance comes about and what driving forces we can identify behind the latter. We examine in this paper the way in which regional governance arrangements develop within different intergovernmental settings by scrutinizing the dynamics at play, retracing the significant determining conditions and highlighting what the implications of regional reform are for central as well as local government actors. Building on regional regime, multi-level and collaborative governance literature, we adopt a regional governance framework to analyze two cases of recent regionalization policy within the Netherlands and Flanders, using a subnational comparative method. Based on our analysis we come to the following findings.

We observe that the common quest for policy integration at the regional level is differently interpreted and taking shape within each case. The problem definition that one adopts with respect to the regional level reflects various belief of what an ideal regional governance approach should look like, as we also found in the literature (Hooghe & Marks 2016). We retrieve elements of both relational and territorial approaches to regions being applied within both cases, which are translated within the resulting governance arrangements and manifest themselves through different starting assumptions, e.g. the idea of an equal partnership between the actors involved from the relational approach, or a stronger focus on (legal) uniformity and area coverage building on the territorial perspective.

Despite these differences in ideas and assumptions regarding the objective and place of regions, we note in both cases that the actual functioning of the conceived regions does not start from scratch, but must also relate to historical trajectories and dynamics that already took place in the past and towards central government in particular must position itself. We witness within the cases that central government detects, acknowledges and tries to support certain elements of bottom-up dynamics, but nevertheless also adopts bureaucratic attitudes and a strive for uniformity. This insight shows us that the positioning of the region in this regard cannot be separated from a broader debate on domestic governance, in which the appropriate role of a central government towards an increasingly complex and hybrid multi-level governance setting, but also towards regional disparities within the territory, continue to raise important questions. We note also that in both cases the central government was the starting point for the established regional governance bodies. In that respect, regional governance processes still rather seem to take place in the shadow of policy developments at the central level. However, the central regionalization reforms studied are forced to relate to existing bottom-up regional cooperation and the interplay between the top down framework and these bottom up dynamics determines the quality of the final outcome.

Based on our study we argue from a broader perspective that regional governance research should not be limited to exploring and identifying rather functional, than territorial approaches to regions, but should make active use of these concepts, not as a binary distinction but as a continuum, which also contains a cyclic element (see also Sykes & Nurse 2021). The region can therefore be understood as a layer on which hybrid forms of governance arrangements arise, various dynamics play a role and that are also subject to changes over time, evolving along with the tasks and challenges for which they are established in response.

Finally, our study has some limitations which may also inspire further research on the topic. Firstly, our focus is limited to a single case of regional governance within each national context and therefore limits global statements about regional governance as a whole. Also, case contamination remains a methodological challenge, given that regional governance reforms rarely develop in isolation for other regional dynamics. Additional research is therefore needed to grasp the interaction of different regional governance dynamics and arrangements within specific national contexts. Secondly, the conceptual framework we adopted was initially designed for the analysis of a (rather functional) regional governance program in the Netherlands. Further (conceptual) research should determine whether this framework is sufficiently appropriate to analyze also more hybrid forms of regional governance and the question whether it pays adequate attention to both functional and territorial features, besides also the intergovernmental relationships through which regional reforms are achieved. Thirdly, regarding data collection our analysis was built on a limited set of interviews. Despite the fact that shifting roles and changing relationships by regional governance were extensively discussed within these interviews, a comprehensive interviewing of all regional actors involved was beyond the scope of this study. Additional research that draws on a more extensive regional round of interviews could provide additional insight on how aspects such as the effectiveness and legitimacy of regional governance are subject to differences between regional contexts and actors.

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