



Conclusions: Intergovernmental Relations: Merits and Limits of the Policy-Focused Approach

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Our book has taken a distinctive, policy-oriented approach to IGR in analysing both specific crisis-driven problems and new, longer-term, and emerging policy issues confronting European governments. We have explored the shifting balances of power within IGR systems focused on the challenges of vertical and horizontal coordination within cross-country, comparative perspectives. In order to position the country cases and policy issues analytically, we have developed an IGR typology (see

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Laffin et al., in this volume) that distinguishes between three types of policy processes (centralized, conflicted, and multi-layered). The authors were requested to apply this typology in their studies and consider crises and new policy issues which have tested the stability and functionality of IGR systems. A crisis is “commonly identified as an extraordinary situation, which results in escalated but temporal instability and uncertainty compared to the pre-existing status quo” (see Wojtowicz, in this volume; Sahin-Mencutek et al., 2022). Crises are challenging. But are they necessarily catalysts for change? Especially in the realm of historically grounded IGR? After all, changes do not occur all at once but rather in stages, or phases, according to various models and theories developed to put transitions into (a temporal) perspective. A classic and well-known example is Kurt Lewin’s change management model (1947) that divides the process of organizational change into the stages of unfreeze—change (or transition)—refreeze. A more recent example is Normalization Process Theory (NPT) in which coherence, cognitive participation, collective action, and reflexive monitoring are the four phases through which innovations are embedded and integrated (May et al., 2020). Of course, these stages and phases should be seen as iterative and interconnected in practice, rather than in a linear form as they are usually presented.

The studies presented in this book confirm this contention. In some cases, crises have opened new windows of opportunity for implementing changes in IGR which would not have been possible otherwise (Kuhlmann et al., 2022). This was, for instance, the case in refugee reception and migrant integration “turning local” in France and Poland (see Kuhlmann and Oehlert, Wojtowicz, in this volume). However, there is also evidence from other cases of institutional stability in the face pressures arising from a public health crisis, as exemplified by the Nordic countries. After a short-term shift in IGR, under the influence of an acute pandemic emergency, towards a more centralized IGR in Denmark, and Sweden, IGR returned to the Nordic normalcy of resilient “cooperative decentralization” (see

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Baldersheim and Haug, in this volume). According to the mayors surveyed in this five-country comparison, the intrinsic feature of the Nordic model of cooperative decentralization remained largely intact. Moreover, the authors claim that it will continue to do so as COVID, in their words, was “a disaster in slow motion” to change central–local relations around. Likewise, Oehlert and Kuhlmann (in this volume) nuanced the partially observed cross-country convergence in IGR related to migrant integration by emphasizing how strongly inter-administrative relations still vary among the historical-administrative traditions (Napoleonic/France; Federal-cooperative/Germany; Nordic/Sweden) of the three countries under study. The same applies to pandemic management in Germany (not included in this book), where, after some ups and downs in IGR, the normal multi-layered, decentralized policy process came to be reaffirmed (Kuhlmann and Franzke, 2021).

The majority of countries studied here showed multi-layered IGR processes, at least during certain phases of a crisis. Countries showing exclusively centralist IGR processes during the entire crisis period are exceptional. The corresponding conflict levels are highly varied and context-dependent. England is undoubtedly the most prominent example of a centralist and conflicted IGR process (see Diamond and Laffin, in this volume), while most other cases correspond to the multi-layered type. Interestingly, we also observe shifts in IGR policy processes over time, driven by specific policy actions in response to changes in crisis affectedness and/or the intensity of intergovernmental conflicts. This is evidenced, for instance, by the French case of migrant integration, where a shift from a pronouncedly centralist to a multi-layered policy process took place (see Oehlert and Kuhlmann, in this volume), also referred to as a “localist turn” in French migration management. In Poland, too, the strong centralist stance on (a rather restrictive) migrant policy and the general trend towards centralization were attenuated by local governments informally taking the initiative and addressing the refugee crisis, thus avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe in the border regions after the outbreak of the war. This shift from centralist towards more multi-layered patterns of IGR processes is not least because, in some cases (e.g. Poland, France), central government actors have proved slower and more bureaucratic in their crisis responses than local ones, which increased pressure and conflict in the intergovernmental setting. Furthermore, local governments frequently drew on the informal resources of their local communities and were better able to bundle and coordinate local resources across different policy sectors to

mitigate the crises. The advantages of multi-layered and decentralized policy processes, which allowed local governments to take the initiative in territorial coordination and cross-sector emergency assistance were present across all crisis issues covered in this book (migration, pandemic, and climate change), albeit to different degrees, depending on the various country contexts and crises periods.

Policy actors in the Nordic countries benefited from a historically ingrained pattern of “cooperative decentralization” (see Baldersheim and Haug, in this volume) which “survived the pandemic stress” and “will probably remain the order of the future” (*ibid*). Yet despite the common administrative tradition and largely convergent IGR pattern of the Nordics, varied implementation regimes emerged, with Denmark, Iceland, and Sweden responding in a more centralized manner, while more decentralized modes of pandemic management emerged in Finland and Norway. Here, again, the policy-focused explanation comes in, pointing to policy actors’ different perceptions and solution strategies despite similar administrative cultures. In the group of Continental European Federal countries studied here, multi-layered flexibility in IGR combined with local pragmatism and crisis experience were key characteristics of crisis management and strategy formulation, as demonstrated in the field of migrant integration and climate policies by Germany (see Oehlert and Kuhlmann, Vellani et al., in this volume). However, the variation in specific policy responses to similar problems emphasizes, once again, the explanatory power of the different understandings and handlings of policy issues by different actors. The study on digital capacity-building through amalgamations in Flanders, too, revealed that—despite local actors’ request for a heightened degree of centralization—the preferred IGR process was that of vertical coordination, multi-layered collaboration, and policy support from both local governments’ own initiatives and IGR sources (see Torfs and Wayenberg, in this volume).

However, the preference for or move to multi-layered IGR in times of crises was not only to be found in decentralized settings (Nordic group, federal countries, some Central Eastern European countries), but also in country contexts shaped by pronouncedly centralist administrative traditions, such as France. Pressures arising from the refugee crisis and the lack of an effective conflict resolution mechanism in the intergovernmental setting prompted French local governments to protest against the predominantly centralist approach, and to proactively respond to the emergencies in their territories even—initially—without major formal competencies

and sources. Moreover, in the case of urban climate strategy formulation in Paris, Vellani et al. (in this volume) identified a notable shift from a highly centralized to a decentralized, multi-layered IGR process.

In general, countries appear to have moved towards more coordination, organizational coupling, and involvement of sub-national actors, mirroring a certain convergence towards the multi-layered IGR type. Yet there are also some exceptions to this trend such as England, with its local governments currently facing an existential crisis (see Diamond and Laffin, in this volume), and Flanders, with its highly centralized financial IGR during the pandemic (see Descamps and Smolders, in this volume). Moreover, in some policy issues, local actors even expressed a preference for a more centralized approach in order to enhance speed, standardization, and institutional alignment. This was particularly the case in the digital capacity-building studied in the two federal countries of Germany and Belgium. The request for a “more centralized approach” (see Torfs and Wayenberg, in this volume) or for “concentration without centralization” (see Wehmeier, in this volume) in the digital transformation of local public administration does not advocate for, however, completely centralizing the task. Yet maintaining participation, mutual feedback loops, and collaboration in the multi-layered process appears to be key to maintaining a “balance between bundled competencies and decentralized structures” (*ibid.*).

While in most of the studied issues and countries, multi-layered IGR processes appear to be predominant for managing major crises and new policy issues, or at least a turn towards this type of IGR could be noticed over time, the level of conflict and contestation in IGR obviously showed more variation across countries and issues. The studies presented in this book have revealed that high conflict levels can occur in both centralized as well as multi-layered (including decentralized) policy processes. This supports the importance of policy factors, actor strategies, and the particularities of specific crisis issues, which can lead to similar conflict levels despite different administrative contexts. Hence high levels of conflict and tension can arise not only in centralist IGR processes but also in more institutionally fragmented and layered settings, where the management of conflict is embedded in a power balance between central/federal and sub-national levels. On the one hand, parts of the empirical analyses presented in this book support the hypothesis that multi-layered and decentralized policy processes are associated with lower levels of IGR conflict intensity (e.g. digitalization in Germany, pandemic management in the Nordic

countries, climate strategy formulation in Berlin and Paris), as compared to centralist policy processes (e.g. England). On the other hand, there are also cases deviating from this pattern such as the example of fiscal IGR in Flanders during the pandemic, where only low conflict levels were recorded despite a centralist IGR process. Conversely, regarding migrant integration in Germany, France, and Sweden, high conflict levels were embedded in multi-layered IGR processes. Thus, the institutional characteristics of IGR (centralist/multi-layered/decentralized) can be associated with varying levels of conflict depending on the policy issue at stake, the country-specific implementation arrangements, the power constellations, and the particular type of crisis to be resolved.

There are some policy issues, such as migrant integration and the refugee crisis, which have produced rather high levels of IGR conflicts in some countries (e.g. Sweden, Finland, Germany, France). This is, on the one hand, due to the urgency, the redistributive character, and the socially as well as politically and ideologically contested nature of this policy field. On the other hand, the analysis of inter-administrative relations (IAR) as a hitherto neglected element of IGR has revealed that specific characteristics of public administration tend to fuel conflicts in IGR processes. For climate policy (Berlin, Paris; see Vellani et al., in this volume) as well as for migrant integration (Finland, France, Germany, Sweden), it was shown that the cross-cutting and multi-level nature of these task areas leads to multi-faceted coordination requirements, entanglement of levels, and ultimately to a high potential of inter-organizational conflicts. Furthermore, in the field of migrant integration and language training vertical IGR pathways, through which tensions could be resolved, were largely missing (see Rauhut and Kettunen, in this volume). Finish and Swedish IGR processes in language training for refugees have, since 2015, thus proven highly controversial (although the IGR-setting in Finland has been more stable than in Sweden). After all, while Sweden has had a long history of generous reception of refugees, Finland has accepted them in only very low numbers (Laine and Rauhut, 2018), thus tempering the magnitude of a (potential) crisis shock and its resulting intergovernmental tensions.

However, the empirical evidence presented in this book also shows that conflict- and issue-driven IGR in some countries might be contrasted with low conflict levels in other countries, which re-emphasizes the activities of policy actors as a major explanatory source. Thus, the case study on Poland revealed that the initial conflicts among different administrative levels regarding the task allocation and responsibilities for the reception of

Ukrainian refugees were soon addressed by various actors in the intergovernmental setting, resulting in cooperative, multi-layered IGR processes with low conflict levels (see Wojtowicz, in this volume). The major reason for this shift was seen in the Polish local governments' swift adaptation to the emergency by way of transcending their formal prerogatives and pragmatically complementing the central government's activities. This ultimately fostered a synergistic and collaborative IGR process rather than a conflicting one. Accordingly, the actions undertaken by the central administration were positively evaluated from the bottom-up as local government representatives fully appreciated their speed and effectiveness. Poland had little experience with handling emergencies related to the extraordinary influx of migrants in an intergovernmental setting, yet the crisis management turned out well, with clearly more cooperation than conflict amongst central and local governments.

Collaborative IGR processes were also perceivable in Belgian/Flemish fiscal grant allocation during the pandemic. Though these processes were classified as centralized IGR because decisions on which grant schemes to install and how to distribute them were highly concentrated at the regional level, "no tensions were reported between the distributing and receiving authorities" (see Descamps and Smolders, in this volume). Because Flemish local governments were seen as responding effectively to the crisis challenges, increased decentralization initiatives were announced by the regional government for the years to come. These discourses mirror the trustful and collaborative relation between the regional and the local levels in Flanders—despite a high degree of centralization in fiscal IGR during the pandemic. This example shows that even in centralized IGR processes, where local governments are excluded from the respective policy decisions, conflict levels are not necessarily high. Under certain circumstances mutual consent and cooperation might prevail. While for Flanders a centralized yet collaborative fiscal IGR process was characteristic, England represents an opposite case because it exemplifies a highly centralized IGR process with high level of conflicts. English local government continues to be the subject of a deepening existential (governance, fiscal, and policy role) crisis. At the same time, the mistrust and the loss of central–local links "has damaged central–local cooperation" (see Diamond and Laffin, in this volume), resulting in increasing conflicts, tensions, and contestation in IGR.

In our sample of countries and issues, we also have evidence of shifting conflict patterns over time. Thus, after an initial phase of climate strategy

formulation centralized at the city level and a conflicted implementation in Berlin, the city has moved towards a more cooperative intergovernmental approach (see Vellani et al., in this volume). The initial overly centralized IGR process had become more and more inflexible, being insufficiently based on operational knowledge and lacking the consultation of lower levels. This tended to lower the incentives for the sub-municipal level (districts) to comply with stipulations from higher levels, as feedback flows to the central level were blocked, preventing the alignment of policy objectives. The subsequent shift towards multi-layered IGR processes contributed to mitigating these shortcomings. As a result, the conflict intensity in IGR was reduced and the overall approach of formulating climate strategies for the City of Berlin turned more collaborative, consultative, and consensus-oriented.

Overall, the policy-focused approach of this book has added a new perspective to IGR research. It has proven to be a viable explanatory scheme for how different actors understand conflict constellations, respond to crises, and cope with new policy challenges. While institutional factors and PA traditions remain crucial variables of comparative IGR analysis, they do not help explain policy *change* and the varying policy responses within PA country clusters. This is where a particular strength of the policy-focused approach comes in. It is true that territory, place, and PA traditions continue to be important categories for IGR analysis, in particular at explaining path dependencies and historically ingrained cross-country-differences in IGR. Yet the contributions of this book have shown that policy actors, in their search for power to achieve specific substantive policy goals, clearly shape IGR too (Hacker and Pierson, 2014). We have seen that countries belonging to the same administrative tradition have not responded in a similar way to crises challenges, but rather deviated from their neighbours, as the example of the Nordic countries in the fields of pandemic and migration management has shown. In order to address particular policy issues and crises, examining actor choices and power-seeking strategies is therefore an analytical necessity. Restraining IGR studies to (traditional) institutional and place-related factors, which analytically privilege different PA-traditions and territorial variables, does not appear to be a promising strategy for explaining policy change under the pressure of crises. Though we are aware that our focus on policy issues, crisis challenges, and policy actors tends to diminish the significance of place and territorial distinctiveness, we argue that the policy-focused approach shows considerable potential for future IGR research in revealing how conflicts and actors' power-seeking strategies affect policy outcomes in crisis management.

The findings of this book undoubtedly make a case for more research on IGR and crises. On the one hand, future studies should investigate in greater depth the extent to which administrative traditions and contexts shape and influence conflicts arising from different types of policy issue, and particularly how IGR are transformed by new crises and policy challenges. Another future research challenge is to move beyond the single-crisis focus, as each chapter of this book only examines IGR in relation to a single crisis. In reality, crises do not emerge and evolve in isolation. Rather, as Diamond and Laffin argue (in this volume), local governments are increasingly confronting intersecting and entangled crises, perhaps best understood in terms of the new challenge of tackling polycrises. Questioning the intersection of contemporary crises and their effects is typical when recognizing the so-called polycrisis environment, wherein governments at different levels are and will be operating and unrolling their interrelations today and tomorrow.

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