Towards an institutional change in the Flemish city-regional regime?

The case of the 'vervoerregio's' (transport regions) in Flanders

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2018, the Flemish government adopted a decree that could change the city – regional regime in Flanders. The government announced the creation of 'transport regions' in 15 sub-regions in Flanders. The scale, administrative organization and competences of those newly created sub-regional institutions are imposed by the Flemish government. The organization is based on a form of intermunicipal and intergovernmental cooperation, between a set of local governments and the key administrative players for mobility policy at the Flemish level. The intermunicipal cooperation is obliged and the scale of most of the 15 transport regions has a city – regional nature.

This paper discusses the creation of these transport regions as an exponent of the institutionalization of city-regional governance arrangements in Flanders. According to Anttiroiko and Valkama (2017) city-regional governance always takes shape in a specific institutional context (see also Salet and Thornley 2007, Kreukels, Thornley et al. 2005). Their institutional analysis of the case of regional governance in Finland illustrates how path dependency, in the form of a strong localism but also a change of the policy regime at the national level, has affected the forms, processes and results of regionalization. They discuss incremental changes and critical junctures in the political regime, which help to explain how the current Finnish government succeeded in establishing a new tier of elected regional government.

Comparative analysis shows the importance of localism in the Belgian political system (Goldsmith 2002, Wayenberg 2005) which seems to be similar to the Finnish case. Political localism is also a main explanatory factor to understand the way the city-regional governing debate evolves or has been obstructed in the region of Flanders (Voets and De Rynck 2008). Local governments are highly dependent upon their political relations with the central level. Local interests are served by the entanglement of governmental tiers through politics where cumulating mandates and party political relations are used as tools to promote local interests at higher tiers of government (De Rynck and Wayenberg 2010). City – regional arrangements are considered not to serve those interests of the smaller local governments, surrounding the Flemish cities.

Historical institutionalism provides an explanation why city-regional governance seems hard to implement in Flanders. However, due to a series of recent developments, things seem to be changing, the transport regions being an exponent of this change. In this contribution we try to grasp these elements of change. We adopt the historical institutionalist frame to analyse the current sub-regional practices in Flanders regarding the creation of transport regions as a new governance arrangement in Flanders. We attempt to give an explanation why this type of governance model is implemented in Flanders. Simultaneously, we assess the potentiality of this governance tool to change the Flemish political regime. Is there a regime change coming up in the region of Flanders, comparable to the regime change in Finland?

We will focus on three research questions:

- How to assess the transport regions as an institutional change in dealing with city-regional policies in Flanders?

- Which critical junctures can be identified that could explain the attempt to create a more effective city-regional government arrangement in Flanders?

- To what extent does the specific institutional and political context of Flanders affect and mould this territorial reform and how can we assess the potentialities and the pitfalls of this attempt to institutionalize a new city – regional governance arrangement?

This paper will be structured as follows: after outlining the conceptual framework, an overview is presented of the current state of the Flemish city-regional debate and its main characteristics. Secondly, we provide a general description of the transport regions as part of a shift in the Flemish mobility policy, followed by an assessment of the transport regions as a potential critical juncture in the Flemish political regime regarding city-regional policy. In the last chapter we comment on possible pitfalls for the transport regions to achieve a real change in regime.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

We conduct an institutional analysis of the case of the transport regions in relation to the city-regional debate in Flanders. Our analysis is based on the historical institutionalist approach to public policy-making, paying particular attention to the way in which the historical development of institutions structure and shape political behavior and outcomes (Thelen 1999, Pierson and Skocpol 2002, Amenta and Ramsey 2010). We do this by highlighting different forms of path dependency and critical junctures related to territorial reform processes and related discourses (Page 2006, Sorensen 2015).

Historical institutionalism provides analytical tools for understanding how institutions structure human behavior, paying particular attention to processes of continuity and change (Boas 2007). A key concept of historical institutionalism is path dependency, referred to as *a sensitive dependence on initial conditions, which in the public policy context implies a fixed political or bureaucratic mindset and stickiness of institutional structures (*Anttiroiko and Valkama 2017, p.155). This so-called 'stickiness' of institutional structures (Boettke, Coyne et al. 2008) helps to explain lock-ins, making it hard to escape given institutional trajectories. Suboptimal outcomes may occur when necessary adjustments cause incremental changes without touching upon the structural basis of a given institutional entity (Peters, Pierre et al. 2005).

A second tool in historical institutionalist analysis is the identification of critical junctures. A critical juncture refers to a situation of uncertainty in which decisions of key actors could have a significant impact on one path of institutional development over possible others (Fioretos, Falleti et al. 2016). According to Capoccia (2015) the concept of critical junctures refers to a set of features of the politics of institution making that are important to understand the reform of path-dependent institutions. A first feature is the importance of policy entrepreneurs in assembling coalitions for institutional change, highlighting the political dimension in institutional reforms. A second feature is the possible disconnect of the initial preferences and institutional outcome of actors, emphasizing the political dynamics that go along with situations of uncertainty. A final feature relates to the important role of the cultural construction of institutional preferences, shaped by dominant actors. Critical juncture analysis should focus on situations where influential groups try to manipulate the preferences of important social groups by exploiting situations of uncertainty, scrutinizing periods marked by contingency (Mahoney 2000).

This paper is based on interviews with key stakeholders and on a strong involvement as action researchers in this process of transformation, in addition to the analysis of legislative materials, evaluation reports and policy documents. We took part as experts both at local level and the Flemish level of the central departments involved in this operation and also as members of expert teams brought together to reflect and advise the Flemish government.

THE FLEMISH POLITICAL REGIME: RELEVANT ASPECTS FOR THE CITY-REGIONAL DEBATE

To assess the potentialities of the transport regions for institutional change, a profound understanding of the current state of the city-regional debate and the Flemish political regime is necessary. We discuss some of the main characteristics of the Flemish regime relevant to the city-regional debate which could potentially have a strong impact on the effectiveness of the transport regions, or which might eventually lead to forms of lock-in and suboptimal outcomes.

A key element in understanding the Flemish city-regional debate is the role of the Flemish government itself as a strong regional government with a set of key policy competences in some crucial policy fields related to city – regional topics and endowed with important policy instruments. That is, besides the already cited 'political localism' in our introduction, probably the most important institutional feature that could explain the specific regime in Flanders, compared to, for instance, the Finnish case. This is of course the main effect of the consecutive reforms of the Belgian state in the last forty years, leading to a different institutional framework that was created in an incremental way but that nevertheless changed profoundly the institutional context in which the traditional city – regional policy problems are situated. The most important critical juncture for the city – regional debate is the state reform itself. Some say that, due to the state reform, Flemish government has become the most important local government, referring to the key competences concentrated and centralized at the Flemish political level.

The federalization process in Belgium has led to a strong regionalization of competences and resources by strengthening the Flemish level by each of the six rounds of state reform. This resulted in a situation where the Flemish government *de facto* has the most important competences related to city-regional policies, for example the planning and exploitation of bus and tram transportation (train transport remained at the federal level), planning and exploitation of regional road infrastructure, spatial planning at city – regional level and the administrative organization of lower tiers of government, including the frameworks for amalgamation and for the intermunicipal cooperation. The dominant position, at least formally, of the Flemish government regarding city-regional issues and the set of administrative, planning and financial instruments at Flemish level explains why the political and administrative organization of the Flemish government itself probably has become the most important key factor related to city-regional policies. The division of competences for the policy fields, related to the political responsibilities of the Flemish ministers and the dominantly sectoral administrative and political organization of the Flemish government at central level explains the creation of sectoral types of administration for functional policies at the sub-regional level in Flanders, the transport regions being a case of the latter, at least at first sight.

Despite its important capacities and the growing set of potential instruments, the Flemish government was in the past very reluctant and hesitant to use its power for elaborating policy arrangements at the city – regional level. Especially in relation to issues of city-regional distribution, redistribution and co-ordination related to spatial planning between cities and smaller local governments surrounding the cities (Derksen 1990), the

consecutive Flemish governments lacked the will to act despite its competences. To understand this tendency a general negative historical attitude towards urbanity needs to be taken into account. As a result of the political dominance throughout the 20th century of the Christian Democratic Party a whole set of instruments, policy structures and resources were developed to promote suburban living in the countryside, as a response to the political rise of socialism and liberalism in the cities (Kesteloot and De Maesschalck 2001). A combination of strong fiscal benefits for house ownership (De Decker, Kesteloot et al. 2009), a very generous land-use policy and cheap commuting transport facilities resulted in an uncontrolled urban sprawl all over the country, leading to impoverished city-centers surrounded by rich residential enclaves and a strong pressure on scarce open space to this day. The urban sprawl and the spread of suburbanity all over the Flemish region now is one the most important geographical and political institutional features, as a heritage of the post – war politics of a neo – liberal regime of economic growth and the open and free market of housing politics, where everyone could buy or build nearly everything anywhere.

The impact of local government compared to the Flemish government, for example on decisions regarding public transport, public infrastructure,… is regarded as minimal. Local governments are relatively small in size and generally weak in responsibilities (Goldsmith 2002) but they are powerful and very important in the electoral business. The political system is based on local conscriptions and political power is embedded in local power territories. Because of this institutional weaknesses local governments are highly dependent on their relation with and within the central Flemish government. In the small region of Flanders (6 million of inhabitants and 300 local governments) the concepts of 'local level' and 'central level' should be interpreted correctly: in fact there is only one political system in which the political parties are the spiders in the web between the political territorial levels. That political system has two divisions: a local and a national one (at the regional and the federal levels), but the interwovenness between both divisions is dense and leads to a strong 'political localism'. Through multiple office holding and party political networks, local interests are promoted at higher tiers of government, making political localism a key feature of Flemish politics (Wayenberg 2005). Regarding city-regional issues, this strong pressure from local governments seems to play a crucial role in blocking several city-regional reforms and infrastructure programs, for example tram line extensions from cities into the suburbs or a more balanced regional social housing policy (De Decker 2011). The smaller local governments in the periphery of the cities use their political relations at the national and Flemish level, fueled by the fear of being dominated by the 'big city' (although the Flemish cities in general have a rather modest size in European comparative perspective).

One could argue, from an outsider's perspective, that the directly elected five Flemish provincial governments seem to be the right and appropriate scale to play an important role in city-regional policy (for a map, see annex). However, research shows that this is not the case (De Rynck and Voets 2006) .The provinces, themselves also characterized by multiple office holding and political localism, never played an important role in the centralized political system of Flanders, politically crushed between a strong and centralizing Flemish government and the local governments as the two main political competitors. Competences and resources of the provinces are strongly called into question by the current Flemish government, which took over culture and welfare competences during this legislation as a compromise between the two important political parties in the Flemish

government: N-VA (or New Flemish Alliance), opposing the provincial level and supporting the abolition of the provincial level and the defenders of the provincial tier (Christian Democratic Party), dominating the coalitions in most of the provinces. The Flemish minister for transport, responsible for the creation of the transport regions, belongs to the N-VA.

All these elements help to explain why the Flemish government opted for the transport regions, based on intergovernmental cooperation between the two government tiers that really matter politically: the Flemish government and the local government. But this new sub-regional arrangement contains interesting new features, that could be described as critical junctures in the Flemish institutional history. We therefore have to explain first the concept of the transport region and how it is related to city – regional policy problems.

TRANSPORT REGIONS AS A SHIFT IN MOBILITY POLICY

In this chapter we give an overview of the transport regions as a part of a potential change in the Flemish mobility policy regime which is characterized as a shift from basic mobility (basismobiliteit, since 2001) to basic accessibility (basisbereikbaarheid) (Weyts 2015).

The draft decree of 'basisbereikbaarheid' (basic accessibility) was accepted by the Flemish government in July 2018 (after a long discussion) but still needs to be approved by the Flemish parliament. The implementation of the decree is now being prepared, full deployment is scheduled for 2020.

KEY CONCEPTS

The principle of basic mobility dictated a minimum supply of public transport for each residential area in Flanders, resulting in a bus stop at less than 750 meter from each Flemish dwelling. This has been since 2001 the dominant policy frame for mobility issues but is now been considered as a very inefficient and much too expensive public transport system given the actual spatial structure of Flanders, dominated by a high degree of what we already have labelled as the 'urban sprawl' (Verbeek, Boussauw et al. 2014). The typical Flemish ribbon development requires a lot of bus stops to service its population, resulting in lower frequencies and less punctuality and leading towards a vicious circle of unattractive transportation lines, higher car-use and traffic congestion.

The principle of basic accessibility propagates a new policy frame, based on the concepts of an integrated network approach of public transport designed along the idea of combi-mobility. It functions as part of a mobility network where combinations of different modes of transport (car, bike, bus, train) are facilitated. To achieve this layered type of transportation, a hierarchic model is established that differentiates between four types of public transportation: the train network, the core network, the complementary network and the customized network.

The train network is the backbone of the public transport. It accounts primarily for the international, interregional and intercity connections.

The core network is complementary to the train network and connects the city centers to each other together with important attraction poles.

The complementary network connects the lines from the smaller cities and towns towards the core network and train network. It functions also as an addition to the core network.

The customized network functions complementary to the higher hierarchical networks and consists out of the sum of local mobility suppliers, for example school transportation and special need transportation.

The draft of the decree of july 2018 creates 15 new 'transport regions' (vervoerregio's), based on intermunicipal cooperation of the local governments in each of the 15 regions. The scale of the 15 regions, the cooperation and their competences are all imposed and regulated by the Flemish government itself. That is new and breaks with the strong tradition of the sacrosanct 'autonomy' of the local governments and the free choice for intermunicipal cooperation, which is included in the concept of local autonomy. The 'transport region' is based not only on a group of local governments: all the Flemish actors responsible for mobility, within the political realm of the

present minister for mobility, have to take part also in the transport region. That is another novelty compared to the historical institutional heritage: the transport region institutionalizes also the intergovernmental cooperation between the two levels of public administration that really matter, politically: local government and Flemish government. It is of course way too early to judge the effects of this decree but at least from an institutional perspective, this arrangement of the transport regions could be described as a rupture with the institutional history. Before we assess potentialities and pitfalls of the new arrangement related to city – regional policy problems, we add some more detail on the transport region.

COMPETENCES

Central government (the federal level for the train network, but mainly the Flemish level for the core network) continues to be competent for the train and core network, but delegates competences regarding the complementary and customized network to the transport regions, being groups of local government. Also, the transport regions are responsible to draw up a sub-regional mobility plan in coherence with a sub-regional vision for future spatial development (Weyts 2017). We return later to that important topic from a city – regional perspective: the role of and possible impact on the urban spatial planning.

GOVERNANCE

The transport region council is based on representatives of local government (usually the mayor), Flemish government (Department of Mobility (MOW), transport company De Lijn, Agency of road and traffic (AWV) and the Belgian Railways. The chairmanship is divided between a representative of the group of local governments and the Department of Mobility. Decisions should be taken by consensus but the transport region has some freedom to decide upon those working and decision rules.

To test and to give the concept of basic accessibility and its organizational impact a more tangible form, four pilot transport regions have been launched two years ago. The Flemish government provided a 'low-regulatory' framework for these pilot regions, switching off several aspects of the current legislation regarding passenger transportation, mobility policy, etc. By doing this, new flexible organizational structures and innovative mobility solutions could be tested to the insights of the four pilot transport regions, adapting those rules to the specific local and geographic contexts.

DEMARCATION OF THE TRANSPORT REGIONS

The shift from basic mobility to basic accessibility goes hand in hand with a new geographical demarcation of transport regions. The delineation process of the transport regions was the output of an administrative cooperation between the departments of Mobility and Environment (competent for spatial planning), a new form of cooperation and an exponent of the pressure towards a more integrated approach towards policy making at the Flemish level. Based on mobility flows, functional relations and existing types of regional cooperation 19 'hypothesis regions' were delineated. Later in the process this proposal became the object of a political deliberation which resulted in a final delineation of 15 transport regions (see map below). This political deliberation did not change the map drastically: we estimate that 80 % of the initial proposal, based on scientific, technical and administrative criteria, survived the political bargaining.

This political deliberation of the final scale in the province of Limburg was motivated by defenders of the provincial tier, resulting in one instead of the original proposed three transport regions for that province, which is probably the area with the most important traditional stronghold of provincialism also as a way of promoting small town interests. This led to a transport region consisting of 42 local governments, the biggest transport region in terms of the amount of local governments (see table).
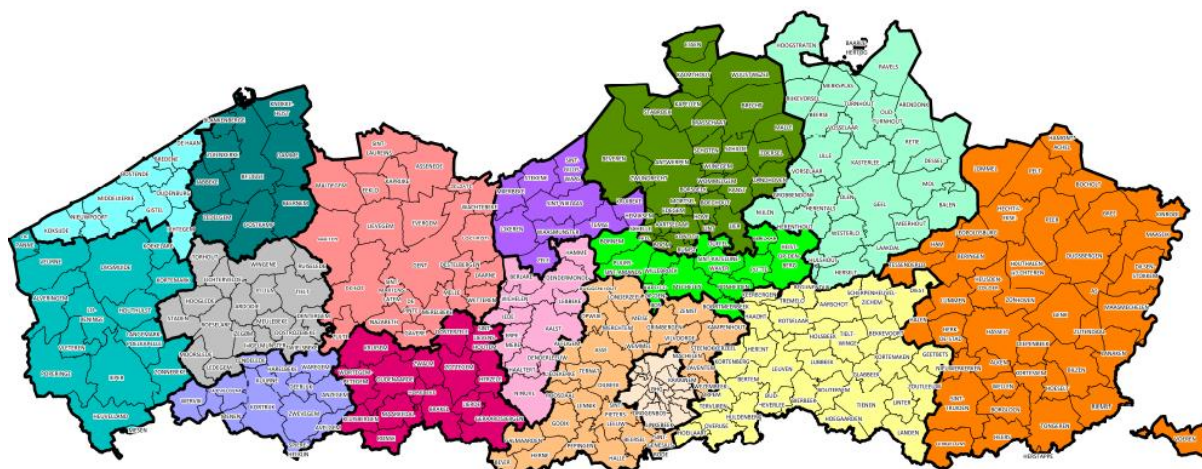
Transport region	Number of Municipalities	Population
Brugge	9	261 222
Kortrijk	13	317 366
Oostende	9	189 525
Roeselare	18	269 959
Westhoek	15	167 091
Aalst	11	315 339
Gent	23	612925
Sint-Niklaas	9	231 615
Vlaamse Ardennen	15	223 993
Antwerpen	32	1125377
Mechelen	12	304 047
Kempen	28	518 754
Brusselse rand	33	597 059
Leuven	31	526 538
Limburg	42	867 413

FIGURE 1: DELINEATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 15 TRANSPORT REGIONS

TRANSPORT REGIONS AS A POTENTIAL CRITICAL JUNCTURE

In this chapter we argue why the transport regions can be seen as a possible tipping point towards city-regional policy. We discuss the reform tools that are being put into practice, in relation to the established scale and delegated competences. Furthermore, we assess the impact on intergovernmental and intragovernmental cooperation, paying attention to political factors concerning the latter.

REFORM TOOLS

We assess the potentialities of the transport regions as a reform by using an earlier developed set of reform tools (Voets and De Rynck 2008) as a descriptive framework, distinguishing eight strategies to deal with city – regional topics and related reforms of public administration:

1) territorial resizing (changing the scale of local governments)

2) fiscal and financial reallocation (vertically, between tiers of government or horizontally, between local governments)

3) creating new governmental tiers (directly elected / federative types of reform)

4) devolution towards existing intermediate tiers

5) voluntary city-regional co-operation between local governments

6) ad hoc institution building for projects and programs

7) general institution building for specific policy spheres (transport, health care, security,…)

8) intergovernmental cooperation / contracts

We describe the transport regions as a general institution, in first instance for the domain of mobility (7), disrupting the Flemish tradition of voluntary cooperation between local governments (5), traditionally dominated by political localism and making the move towards a more centrally imposed cooperation in a more federative inspired model of cooperation between a set of local governments (1 and 3).

The transport regions have control over only some competences for some aspects of the mobility problem. The decree refers to the possible interaction between mobility and spatial planning, as a free choice of the partners in the transport region, but the Flemish minister for spatial planning (belonging to another party in the government) and the Flemish administration for spatial planning are not involved in the transport region and the transport region has no formal competences in the field of spatial planning. But it is, due to the urban sprawl, quite difficult to discuss mobility matters in the transport region without linking this to the urban planning at the level of the regions. This shows the rather ambiguous position of the transport regions: mobility and spatial planning are twins, but the transport regions have no formal authority to discuss matters of spatial planning and the Flemish actors responsible for spatial planning are not integrated in the organization of the transport regions.

To the extent that not only competences regarding mobility are delegated towards the transport regions, but that those transport regions, on their own initiative, could also debate about spatial planning and land use issues

could be taken into account as part of the mobility debates, the transport regions could evolve informally towards a city-regional government tier deciding upon core issues of the Flemish political system.

The reform also opens up important issues of reallocation of fiscal and financial means (2) and the management of intergovernmental relations (8), as part of the set of potential city – regional instruments. The implementation of the transport regions also takes place in a context where some municipal borders are changed due to amalgamation on the initiative of local governments (1) and strategic regional and city – regional projects are developed bottom – up by local actors but supported by the Flemish government (6), all having an influence on the outcomes of the transport regions.
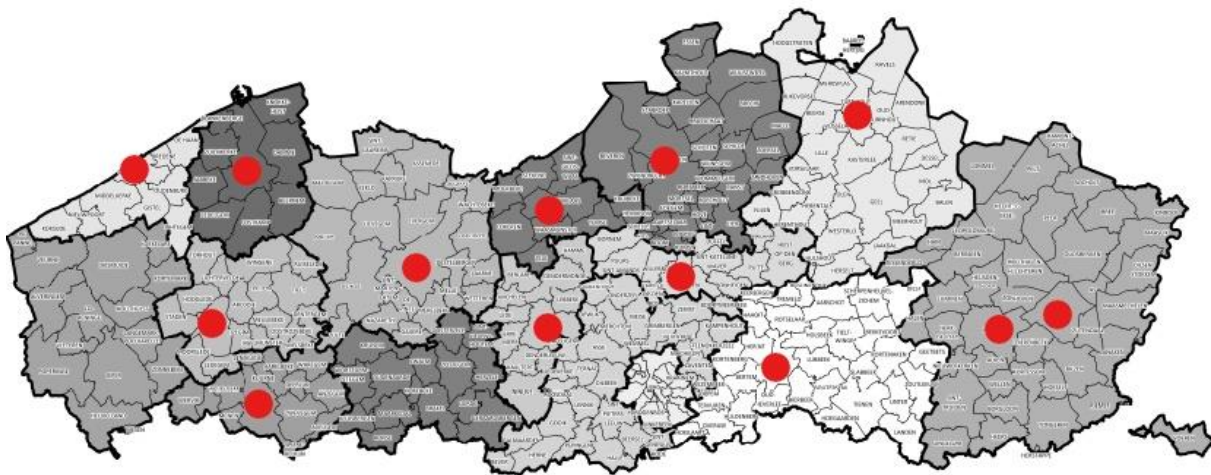
SCALE AND COMPETENCES

FIGURE 2: DELINEATION OF THE TRANSPORT REGIONS WITH REGIONAL CITIES (RED)

Although the transport regions aren't officially considered and announced to cover a city-regional scale, in practice we notice that the vast majority of the transport regions have a regional city in its centre (indicated by red bullets on the map), providing the most important mobility hubs. These regional cities are a recurring element in a lot of historical geographical research in Belgium and Flanders (Schraepen, De Rynck et al. 2018), making them an important building block for a city-regional demarcation of Flanders. The 15 transport regions, with two exceptions for the most rural parts of the Flemish region, could therefore be considered *de facto* as a city-regional delineation, thereby indirectly acknowledging the need for policy making on this scale. But mentioning 'cities' as part of the political rhetoric and in relation to regional topics, remains a rather sensitive matter, while everyone knows that the most important mobility topics are related to urban traffic, urban services and urban commuting regional networks.
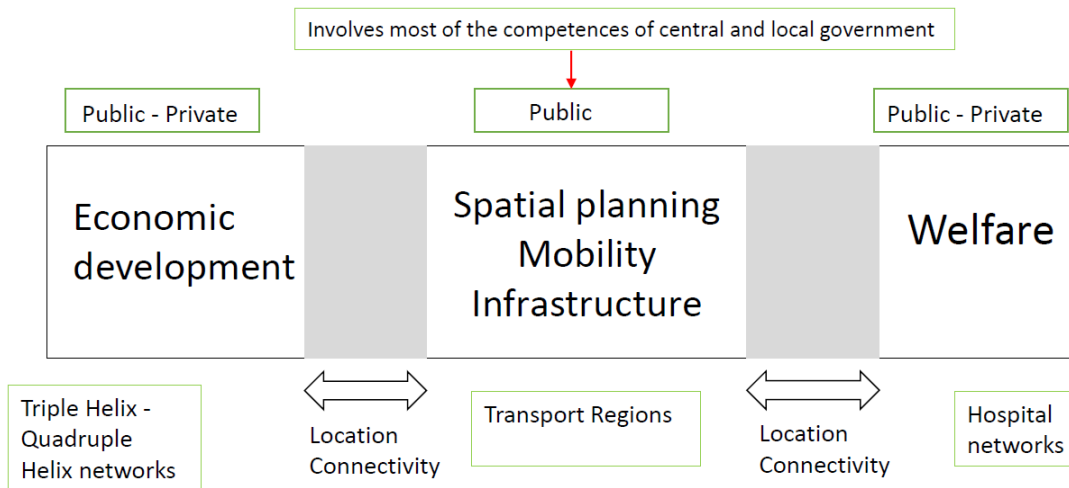
FIGURE 3: RELATION BETWEEN POLICY DOMAINS AND THE POSITION OF CENTRAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Not only the delineation of the scale of the transport regions 'fits' the city-regional scope, but also its competences as illustrated in figure 3. The Belgian and for that matter also the Flemish state system, is often characterized as neo-corporatist, indicating that in domains such as welfare, education, social security and labor market important private civil organizations have a strong impact on society and public policy. Other characteristics concern the big autonomy of market actors and a facilitating attitude of the government towards economic innovation. Unlike competences of welfare and economic development, competences regarding spatial planning, mobility and infrastructure constitute the core of the Flemish public sector. Governments authorize the construction of buildings and roads, relying for the latter on land-use planning. Public choices in the policy domains of spatial planning, mobility and infrastructure are perceived as very sensitive, making up the core of political power and belonging to the core competences of local government and government in general, also at the Flemish level. Although the transport regions, in this stage, have no formal competences for spatial planning matters, as we explained above, the interaction between mobility and spatial planning cannot be avoided, be it in informal discussions and in the absence of formal competences for spatial planning. Those are important restrictions. But nevertheless: this new policy arrangement on a city – regional scale, based on imposed cooperation between local governments and dealing, partly informally, with topics of spatial planning and mobility, could be considered as a potential step towards a city –regional government tier.

A SHIFT TOWARDS INTER-GOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION

A systematic reading of recent Flemish policy documents reveals that the transport regions are only one indicator of an increasing shift towards the growing need for a more territorial based approach for public policies to tackle future societal challenges (Temmerman, De Rynck et al. 2017). This explains the creation of the transport regions, as part of a territory –oriented shift of the Flemish government.

The Flemish government seems to acknowledge in her policy documents that future challenges exceed the local policy sphere and need to be addressed on a supralocal level, leading to various types of sub-regional (mostly sectoral) cooperation, but also urging for new types of intergovernmental cooperation between the local and

the Flemish level. This reconfiguration has certainly also been impacted by the sustainability agenda, especially the ambition to counter the effects of the urban sprawl by elaborating a more city – regional centered spatial planning and transport policy between local and central governments in different policy spheres. Mobility challenges, for example the economic cost of traffic jams, are seen as a major societal problem by a lot of political actors, increasing the pressure on local but especially the Flemish government to act on a territorial basis and in a more integrated way and to restrict the neo – liberal market logic towards housing lots and the spread of further suburbanity. The cost of this policy is now part of a new policy frame announced by the Flemish government, which has been presented as the 'Betonstop': we can't afford to exploit new open space any longer. In 2040 no open space could be used for more concrete (beton).

The Flemish public transport (buses and trams) is organized so far by 'de Lijn', which is an autonomous agency of the Flemish government. Until now, the local political pressure for better public transport services reached 'de Lijn' through party political networks and central-local relations, as we described earlier. The creation of the transport regions should give local governments more responsibilities and more control over the planning and organization of the regional transport network, decentralizing power from 'de Lijn' towards groups of local government in the transport region councils. This means also that 'de Lijn' should adapt her internal organization, developing towards a more decentralized organization acting in 15 transport regions.

To a certain degree the transport regions bear similarities with the rescue service zones, an instrument of the federal level. The federal government delegates competences to groups of local governments, deciding top – down and hierarchically upon the scale, competences and the finance model of these rescue zones. This top – down model has not been used so far in the Flemish region, due to the strong tradition of local autonomy, based on the idea that local governments are also free to decide whether or not they want to cooperate with other local governments. The transport regions seem to break with this tradition.

A SHIFT TOWARDS INTRA-GOVERNMENTAL COOPERATION
The transport regions, as a part of the evolution towards basic accessibility, do not only affect the cooperation between (groups of) local governments, but also have a profound impact on the Flemish government itself. The shift towards basic accessibility and the creation of the transport regions lead to important organizational changes regarding the administrative reorganization, the working methods, the budgets and the reallocation of the staff in the Flemish department of mobility and public Infrastructure (MOW), the agency of roads and traffic (AWV) and the Flemish transport company (De Lijn). Those are the three important and influential Flemish actors, within the realm of competences of the Flemish minister of mobility.

The role of MOW as the main administrative actor, should evolve towards a more coordinating one, providing the co-chairman of the transport region council and assisting the transport region council in the elaboration and implementation of a regional mobility plan.
AWV as the important autonomous agency responsible for the exploitation of the road infrastructure at the sub-regional level, should change its organization to a more supportive role towards the transport region council, providing new regional managers as the contact point for local governments.

'de Lijn', as mentioned above, already started a huge restructuring plan for its internal organization, orienting itself towards the 15 transport regions via regional managers and anticipating for future competition as a result of the European liberalization of the passenger market in 2020.

The Flemish government can decide upon tram and bus transport but not for the train transport which falls under federal jurisdiction. The Belgian National Railways are often perceived as a strongly politicized organization, making it a very autonomous actor, hardly affected by the Flemish government. The transport regions, bringing them together with local governments around the table could be perceived as a first (very cautious) step towards more coordination of policy agendas, which for example could lead to projects of better alignment of bus and train transport in regional mobility hubs.

A SHIFT IN THE POLITICAL POWER BALANCE

A political factor facilitating and explaining the shift towards the transport regions is the rise of a 'new' political party named the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA). A new, more neo-liberal agenda has been adopted, based on economies of scale, austerity and dismantlement of the public sector. Decentralization of public services fits into this agenda. Also, the N-VA has a low political affinity with the intermediate tier of the provinces, traditionally a stronghold of the 'old' political parties. The N-VA wants to strengthen the power of the party at the local level and is strongly attached to the local governments. Strengthening the provincial tier for better city-regional governance arrangements has never been a political option. Setting up a new governance arrangement based on local governments matches the agenda and the ambitions of the N - VA.

PITFALLS FOR INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

In this section we discuss some of the main difficulties the transport regions are facing and which may prevent them from provoking a real regime change. We distinguish between issues of financial burden sharing, issues of capacity and the (missing?) link between the domains of mobility and spatial planning.

FINANCIAL BURDEN SHARING

In terms of metagovernance the role of the Flemish government can be characterized as multiple, being not only the network designer and framer of the transport regions but also being a important network actor according to the role typology of Sorensen and Torfing (2009). The Flemish government is involved officially as an important and executive actor in the transport regions, via MOW, AWV and 'de Lijn'. The reorganization process towards the transport regions creates a lot of tensions and internal discussions inside and between these Flemish administrative organizations concerning the redesign of their administration, the reallocation and decentralization of their budgets to the councils of the transport regions.

The total exploitation budget of each transport region stays on the same level as the current budgets available. As a result, more bus transportation can only be provided by creating efficiency gains through reorganizing the current transport lines, or by self-financing of the transport region, by the local governments themselves. This principle, referred to as working with 'closed envelopes', could create a lot of tensions within the transport

regions, fearing more budget cuts, less investment in public transport and (as a result) more competition and conflicts between local government inside the transport region council. This could lead to sharp conflicts of redistribution between local governments and could impede rather than improve the atmosphere of working together at the city – regional scale. In the end, this could make city – regional policies based on collaboration between local governments even more difficult than it already is nowadays.

ISSUES OF CAPACITY

Another critique concerns the scale of the transport regions, some of them considered by experts of being too small to provide sufficient capacity to support the transport regional council, and which lacks the critical mass and necessary density of inhabitants to establish an effective public transport system. This criticism is related and mixed up with the reform and liberalisation agenda that hits 'de Lijn', putting more emphasis on issues like the profitability and competitiveness of public transport.

It remains unclear who will provide the necessary staff capacity to support the transport region council and to elaborate the regional mobility plans. There certainly is not enough capacity within the Flemish administration. Taking up the management of this transport regions is a totally new task for this administration, which is not adapted yet to this transition. Although the provincial tier has not been integrated in the policy concept, the provinces could play an important role in the functioning of the transport regions by resolving this capacity problem. Civil servants of the provincial tier, together with the staff of existing intermunicipal associations and regional cities, could provide the (crucial) administrative support for the transport region councils, giving the provinces indirectly some informal legitimacy and, maybe, even strengthening their political position.

LINK BETWEEN MOBILITY AND SPATIAL PLANNING

Another issue of tension that we already mentioned in general, concerns the absence of the link of the transport regions with the domain of spatial planning, at least formally, in the design of the transport regions. The draft decree states that the mobility plans of the transport regions need to be coherent with a regional vision for spatial development (Weyts 2017). Currently, no spatial policy plans exist at the scale of the transport regions or the city – regional level. The draft of a new spatial policy plan at the Flemish level (Beleidsplan Ruimte Vlaanderen) only provides the possibility for voluntary cooperation between local governments regarding the development of new (inter-local) spatial policy plans, but it does not impose a predefined scale for cooperation. Therefore, supralocal spatial policy development will be strongly depending on (and bounded by) the will towards voluntary cooperation by local governments. Spatial planning belongs to the competences of the Christian Democratic Party, who is the strongest political party at the local level for the moment, and who is opposed to interference in the sphere of the local autonomy.

However, the ambition to develop a more efficient transport system is strongly interwoven with the issue of counteracting urban sprawl, making a close collaboration between the domains of mobility and urban planning necessary. At the administrative level the delineation of the transport regions was the result of a close collaboration between the departments of Mobility and Environment, resulting in a mutual agreed scale as a

basis for future sub-regional development. This was a new phenomenon and a rupture with the traditionally very functional organized Flemish administrative departments.

The more collaborative relation between both domains at the administrative levels stands in strong contrast with the interactions within the political sphere of government. The delineation of the transport regions therefore is not retained as a scale in the Flemish spatial policy plan for sub-regional issues. Instead the plan calls for voluntary intercommunal cooperation for the latter, respecting the autonomy of local government concerning land-use policy. This is a very illustrative example of the way the Flemish government actually works and how opposite interests try to find their way throughout the Flemish official and political constellation. This is reflected directly in the organization and ambitions but also the ambiguity of the transport regions.

Another example of how path dependency interferes with current sustainable spatial planning goals at the city – regional level is the case of the transferable development rights. Until today, the actual spatial development of Flanders is to a large extent dictated by the national zoning plans (Gewestplannen) from the seventies (Vermeiren, Vervoort et al. 2018), offering a rich supply of building land and industrial areas, enabling the actual Flemish suburban sprawl (De Decker 2011). The building rights offered by the *gewestplan* created a massive land stock which became a form of 'sleeping capital' reflecting strong financial expectations by land owners, firmly defended by a coalition of rural municipalities and the construction sector (De Decker 2017). Recent studies examine the possibility of a system of transferable development rights as a way of preserving open space by transferring building rights from badly located sending sites to well-located areas suitable for densification (Vlaanderen 2016, Coppens, van den Nieuwenhof et al. 2017). However, a critical precondition for implementing a market for development rights is scarcity, ensuring a sufficient demand for more development rights at receiving sites to compensate for the offered development rights from sending sites. In Flanders, the current legal offer of building land largely exceeds the need for future housing development in the coming decades (Vlaanderen 2016), being an historical heritage of the *gewestplan* (Cabus 1985). To create this needed scarcity a very substantial land reallocation project seems to be necessary, demanding a strong intervention and financial engagement of central and local government. However, recent attempts to implement similar kind of programs (for example a building ban for fragile forest areas) were quickly abandoned after strong protest from mayors of rural municipalities, indicating how difficult and politically sensitive future reallocation programs at the sub-regional level promise to be.

A specific tendency in Flemish policy of the last two decades, notably in the domain of urban planning, is a trend towards decentralization of competences to the local level (Nadin 2018). The spatial structure plan in 1997 introduced the subsidiarity principle which gave rise to a consecutive round of transfer of competences related to building permits to the local level. Recent changes in the codex on land use planning (VCRO) are mostly oriented towards simplifying procedures and the reduction of the turnaround time of building permits but also provides more opportunities to deviate from existing zoning plans (Coppens and Vloebergh 2017). The combination of the latter seems to amplify a (already existing) market oriented approach to land use planning (Lind 2002), strongly oriented towards private real estate development, giving more freedom to local

government for further urbanization and leading towards an increasing pressure on the (already scarce) open space left.

Taking together the lack of formal competences of the transport regions in the field of urban planning, the absence of a strong and sound framework for spatial planning at the Flemish level, the increased autonomy of local governments in this field and the difficulties related to the transferable building rights as a crucial precondition for spatial planning at the sub-regional level, those choices seem to hamper considerably the potentials of the transport regions to play a significant role in urban planning at a city – regional level.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

We gave an overview of the main characteristics of the current Flemish regime relevant for the city-regional debate. A first element is the dominant position of the Flemish government itself for nearly all important policy matters at the sub-regional level, as a result of six rounds of Belgian state reform. The political and administrative organization of the Flemish government explains the creation of functional administrative initiatives at the sub-regional level like the transport regions, a regulative arrangement as part of a functional policy. Secondly, a general negative historical attitude towards urbanity needs to be taken into account. A mix of anti-urban instruments, policy structures and resources facilitated an uncontrolled urban sprawl all over the country, an important institutional feature which has a big impact on the mobility issues tackled by the transport regions. A third element relates to the strong interwovenness between the local and central government, leading towards 'political localism'. Local governments in the periphery of the cities lobby successful at the central level to block city-regional reforms and programs, in order to maintain their local autonomy.

Due to a gradual upscaling of local policies and downscaling or decentralization of central Flemish policies, a reconfiguration of public administration on a city – regional scale is going on in the Flemish region. This reconfiguration is impacted by the sustainability agenda, especially the ambition to counter urban sprawl by elaborating a city – regional centred transport policy. The case of the transport regions is analysed as a case of improving the coordination both at the intergovernmental and the intragovernmental level which contains clear ruptures with the historical institutionalization of Flanders / Belgium, dominated by political localism, anti – urbanity and local autonomy. The rise of a new and dominant Flemish party, the N – VA, oriented towards neo – liberal decentralization and strengthening her position at the local level, could bring about a rupture with this institutional history. This explains the rise of this new form of city – regional governance arrangement with a top – down imposed form of intermunicipal cooperation and a new form of intergovernmental cooperation.

The transport regions contain elements that could be described as critical junctures in the Flemish institutional history. Its demarcation covers a city-regional scale for most parts of Flanders, providing a pretext for policymaking on this level despite the taboo on an urban-centered political rhetoric. The delegated competences towards the transport regions, so far only mobility issues, can be considered as core competences of government in general. To the extent that also spatial planning competences could be taken into account, at least informally and based on bottom – up dynamics, the transport regions could become a potential city-regional government tier. Current reforms are not (yet) this far-reaching but could be a stepping stone towards a regime change where close intergovernmental cooperation and a more territory-based policy, already taking place through important organizational changes in the Flemish administration, could become the leading principles of a renewed regime.

At the same time however financial burden sharing, issues of capacity and political tensions between municipalities and within the Flemish government put the relation between local and Flemish government officially and politically to the test, which could also lead to suboptimal outcomes, being less instead of more city – regional cooperation in this case. The deployment of the transport regions is strongly affected by a fierce

political battle between the two dominant political parties of the Flemish government. Ideological beliefs of The Christian Democratic party (minister of spatial planning) and the New Flemish Alliance (minister of mobility) differ greatly regarding crucial aspects of the transport regions such as the autonomy of local government and the role of the provinces. Current conflicts regarding the financial impact of the transport regions and related spatial programs together with decentralization and marketization of spatial planning might also provoke a scenario in which traditional path dependencies strongly impact the institutional outcomes of this new governance arrangement represented by the transport regions, undermining a real change in the Flemish regime.

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Annex

FIGURE 4: DELINEATION OF THE FLEMISH PROVINCES