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THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF INTER-MUNICIPAL ARRANGEMENTS IN EUROPE: FINDINGS FROM THE UNUSUAL SUSPECTS*

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Abstract

Research on Inter-Municipal Cooperation (IMC) in Europe suffers from a deficit of international comparative studies. This article presents an in-depth analysis of the level of institutionalization of IMC arrangements, claiming its relevance for future research and suggesting a set of post-typological dimensions needed for its characterization. It ends with a recommendation of new research agendas. In addition to bringing up-to date information, it aims at contributing with new knowledge by including countries not involved in previous comparative research and new 'after crisis' data. The research methodology also allowed the analysis of individual institutions.

Keywords: inter-municipal cooperation, institutionalization, local government, Europe.

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1. The relevance of inter-municipal cooperation in Europe

Inter-municipal arrangements are flourishing in European local government landscape. The motivation for this article lies in the intensity and diversity of these emerging answers to the challenge of scale and efficiency in service provision at the local and regional level. By formulating joint research questions and hypotheses verified in different national settings, our research allowed for the comparison between several institutional arrangements and, particularly, its relative prominence in different political and organizational cultures.

Inter-municipal cooperation has been an important topic of debate in European academic literature for a long time. It is well rooted in more general theories of co-operation, which are present in sociology, psychology, organization theory and game theory. On a theoretical level, cooperation between local governments as a means to achieve additional gains or a method to respond to problems of coordination, was already present in the 1950's within the debate (e.g., in public choice) on the new organization of metropolitan areas. A comprehensive summary of debates and related empirical research may be found in Dowding and Feiock (2012). However, studies of IMC in Europe suffer from a deficit of comprehensive, international comparative research. So far the most wide-ranging study covered eight European countries and has been undertaken by Hulst and van Montfort (2007, followed by a shorter discussion in 2011). In Central and Eastern Europe the volume comparing scope and forms of IMC in five countries has been edited by Swianiewicz (2011). There are also publications comparing IMC in two different countries (e.g., Wollmann, 2008, 2010, on Germany and France; Bolgherini, 2011, on Italy and Germany; Bolgherini, 2014, on Italy and Spain) or reviewing evidences on the impact of IMC on costs in a single local service (e.g., Bel, Fageda and Mur, 2014; Bel and Warner, 2015 – both on waste management).

Although scholars have found it difficult to agree on how to explain why local governments do or do not collaborate with each other, there is considerable evidence that the institutionalization of cooperative forms of supra-municipal service provision has been occurring for a long time (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007). In this context, municipalities have taken into account multiple aspects of the expected advantages of working together, be it as a result of voluntary agreements, or as a consequence of imposed collaboration.

These collaborative arrangements between municipalities in order to handle collective issues have taken various forms. Inter-municipal cooperative arrangements vary in shape, scope and level of institutionalization. They result from the political initiative of several actors and present different forms in their fundamental nature. Additionally, its main drivers and intrinsic motivations are of multiple natures. To add complexity to this landscape, administrative traditions, governance systems, political culture, and the different levels of local autonomy in each European country makes the advancement of comprehensive typologies a problematic, if not unmanageable, task.

To look in depth into these inter-municipal institutions has been claimed as one of the main tasks still to fulfil by researchers (Teles, 2016a). The democratic dynamics, the service provision role, its relevance and organizational density in most European countries cannot rely on vague information, descriptive comparative research and mere legal and constitutional frameworks. Knowledge on this topic is indeed needed and requires more empirical studies exploring several of its features. It also requires both inter-countries as well as intra-country analysis of its diversity. In fact, this is precisely one of the most neglected aspects of previous comparative research, and - especially - of the tentative typologies that have been suggested. The generalization exercises and comprehensive frameworks, given the fact that research has drawn conclusions with an overall perspective, far from the individual level of the institutions, have made diversity lose some of its color; at the same time, diversity and the plurality of forms it takes is precisely one of the most relevant features of inter-municipal organizations. In order to address two of its main challenges, the diversity of inter-municipal arrangements and the need to provide in-depth information about its institutional aspects, we have conducted a common research project in eight European countries. The main objective of our article and of the analytical dimensions it explores is indirectly related to the general debate on upscaling or decentralization reforms in Europe, and the role that inter-municipal cooperation plays in that setting. The general aim of this article is to contribute, therefore, to explore the dynamics, experiences and drivers of inter-municipal cooperation in Europe, given its increasing incidence in contemporary local governance.

2. The need to study inter-municipal cooperation

Inter-municipal cooperation, as a research topic, is still quite under-developed and requires a significant expansion of some of its most relevant analytical features. In this article we aim at addressing some of these gaps, particularly in three areas: (1) suggesting the need to include more dimensions in the characterization and in the comparative analysis of these arrangements; (2) providing in-depth information on country diversity, and (3) claiming that the degree of institutionalization is an important aspect to explore, given the evidence it can provide regarding the role, capacity and relevance of IMC. The latter will draw extensively from the empirical analysis presented in the next two sections of the article, where the within-country variation of the level of institutionalization of inter-municipal arrangements is disclosed, analyzed and compared. The last section of the article will draw on this analysis and try to contribute to establish a road map for research on IMC in the near future, particularly regarding the mechanisms and tools for comparative studies, with the post-ty-pology approach we suggest.

Post-typological approaches

Diversity is the best word to describe IMC institutional landscape in European local governance. Moreover, this is not only a matter of comparative analysis at the national level, but also of diversity within each country. Typologies as the ones presented in previous comparative studies, though relevant in providing wider pictures of IMC forms, tend to water down the color of such diversity. In-depth, individual case analysis would certainly provide other kind of data and information regarding the functioning of these arrangements, illustrating in a more complex and detailed way some of the post-typology research questions that we claim should be addressed.

In depth information

Our analysis does not focus on all IMC institutions, since it excludes less formal collaborative networks like contractual agreements that are quite prominent. This way we intend to accurately portray the particular phenomena of the variation of institutionalization amongst these governance arrangements. In addition, the data used in this article brings new up-to-date material. The decade difference between this research project and the data collected for Hulst and van Montfort's (2007) is important at least twofold. First, it covers an economic crisis which in many countries stimulated debates on territorial reforms, including impact on IMC (e.g., Teles, 2016b). Second, the 2004 (and then 2007) EU enlargement has changed the nature of inter-municipal cooperation in Europe, by adding a strong EU dimension among the motives of cooperation. The fact that we add new countries (not used before in comparative research in this field) and the new post-crisis landscape is certainly relevant. Furthermore, the uniform methodology of research in the individual involved countries allowed for part of the analysis to go down from country by country level to the level of individual IMC institutions. This in-depth common information allowed not only new understandings on the variation among countries, but also internal variation within each country. This allowed us to ask new questions and formulate hypotheses concerning the variation of IMC forms in Europe.

The diversity of the institutionalization of IMC

The main and seminal question remains to be answered: we are still looking for evidence of the relevance of these inter-local cooperative arrangements. Though highly emphasized in academic literature (e.g., Teles, 2016a), there is still a need to attest how important are IMC institutions in the functioning of local government systems in individual countries. How municipalities formalize their collaborative arrangements sets an important dimension of analysis. Relying on loosely coupled policy networks, with informal character, or formalizing procedures, rules, and governing entities represent two opposite levels of engagement. The latter could imply service integration and shared power, while the former can facilitate volatile engagements.

For this analysis we limit our interest to IMC arrangements which are formalized (e.g., they are new, separate legal entities) and permanent rather than ad hoc. It means that we do not take into account contract agreements for service delivery between municipalities (they do not create any new entity, since they have often very limited duration). Therefore we focus on forms such as microregions (in Slovakia or Czech Republic), inter-municipal unions, associations, communities in various coun-

tries. We claim that in order to get a first picture of an inter-municipal arrangement it is important to assess its level of institutionalization, assuming that the intensity of such forms of cooperation is an appropriate indicator of its relevance.

3. Data and methods

As we explain in the previous sections of this article the realm of inter-municipal cooperation is very much diversified both between and within countries and diversity makes comparative studies extremely difficult. That explains why relevant studies so far have concentrated on descriptive analysis of situation within individual countries and relatively general international comparisons (e.g., Hulst and Montfort, 2007, 2011; Swianiewicz, 2011), comparative analysis of pairs of countries (e.g., Bolgherini, 2011, 2014; Klimovsky et al., 2014; Wollmann, 2010) or on inter-municipal cooperation in a single service area only (e.g., Bel, Fageda and Mur, 2012). In spite of the methodological and organizational difficulties we try to move a step forward and downscale our analysis to the level of individual IMC institutions. The study of IMC presented in this article covers eight European countries: Czech Republic, Germany, Iceland, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain¹. We aimed at including 'unusual suspects' - countries which so far have been less frequently discussed in international literature in relation to inter-municipal cooperation. Most typically, when IMC is referred to in European countries, one may expect that cases which would be brought to illustrate the discussed issues would include France, Finland, Germany, Italy or Netherlands. Much less is known about most of the rest of Europe. Our study includes four countries of the so far heavily under-explored New EU Member States from the Eastern part of the continent (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). IMC in five countries of the Eastern Europe (including two of the New Member States) were studied at the end of the previous decade (Swianiewicz, 2011), but it was only an exploratory study, with no comparative methodology. Moreover, our selection covers also several relatively small (in terms of population size) European countries (Iceland, Slovakia, and Slovenia); while the previous comparative study of Hulst and van Montfort (2007) was focused on mid-size and large countries (the smallest included in their study were Finland and Belgium).

The role of IMC in the provision of the functions local governments are responsible for is largely diversified across Europe. One simple measure of IMC development is the number of IMC formalized, permanent institutions (i.e., excluding for example ad hoc contractual agreements, or loose networks of cooperation) in which the average municipality is involved in – we call it the density index of IMC. In most of the forms taken into account there is possibility of multiple membership (e.g., a Polish municipality may be member of more than one inter-municipal union). In Table 1

¹ In case of Germany collection of empirical data was limited to Land of Brandenburg and in case of Spain to Catalunya. Moreover, data collected on Brandenburg are very limited, so Germany is covered only by a small proportion of presented analysis.

we have been able to present the figure from seven out of eight countries covered by our study. Except for Catalunya,² in each of the countries the municipality is typically involved in at least one IMC institution (plus more numerous informal networks and contractual agreements), which confirms that we are discussing the issue which is a common practice of local governance.

The simplistic but sufficiently precise measure reflecting this variation is the size of budgets of IMC institutions expressed as proportion of the total municipal budget (called here 'IMC intensity index'). In short, the index tells what proportion of municipal services (measured by amount of spending) is arranged through permanent inter-municipal cooperation institutions. The index may vary from 0 (no IMC at all) to 100% (all services are provided through IMC institutions). Surprisingly, taking into account a high number of publications concerning IMC in different countries, the financial dimension has been highly under-researched and the availability of relevant data is very limited. In our Table 2 we present values of 'intensity index' for several countries of Europe. The index is based only on spending of formalized, permanent IMC entities (usually being separate legal persons), so it excludes for example ad hoc relationships in which one local government provides services to another municipality on the basis of contractual agreements. We concentrate also on the cooperation on the municipal tier, so we exclude multi-level as well as arrangements in which an important role is played by non-public sector actors (e.g., supported by EU funds Local Action Groups).

Table 1: IMC density index – number of IMC permanent institutions the average municipality is involved in

Czech Republic	1.8
Germany (Brandenburg)	2.2
Iceland	2.4
Poland	0.86-1.02(*)
Portugal	4.11
Slovenia	1.1
Spain (Catalunya)	0.5

(*) Depending whether we take into account all registered entities (the higher number) or only those which are actually active.

Source: Authors' own calculation

As it is clear from the data in Table 2, IMC in the countries we concentrate on plays usually a more marginal role than in the countries considered as European 'champions of collaborative solutions', such as France and Finland. Going beyond aggregate

² There are more numerous collaborative arrangements of local governments in Catalunya, especially *consorcios*, but they usually include not only inter-municipal (which is the focus of our article) but also multi-tier cooperation involving provinces.

Table 2: IMC density index

– spending of IMC institutions as proportion of total municipal spending in the country

France	>30%
Finland	23%
Netherlands	19%
Portugal	10.3%
Czech Republic	2.9%
Poland	2.85%
Spain (Catalunya)	0.8%
Slovenia	0.4%

Source: France (Hertzog, 2010, 2018), Finland (Statistics Finland, no date), Netherlands (Allers and De Greef, 2018), other countries – own calculation of authors of the article in this issue.

national data, the common research protocol included conducting the same survey (i.e., asking the same questions) in all involved countries. The survey was conducted in individual countries between September 2014 and the end of 2015, and the total number of surveyed IMC entities was 466. Our respondents were recruited from offices of IMC institutions, which implied a concentration on formal inter-municipal entities (usually legal entities), and not on more loose networks or contractual agreements among municipalities. Ideally, we intended to research the same form of inter-municipal institutions in each of the countries, but, as we explained in the previous sections, this is not possible in the complex world of diversified forms of IMCs. Instead, we decided that in each of the countries we would focus on the most formalized institutional structures (see also Table 3). Respondents had a choice of either on-line or postal survey. The survey questions were related to the following topics:

- basic information on the IMC institution (area of activity, number of employees, etc.);
- motives of establishment;
- role of various actors (e.g., mayors of member municipalities, councilors, civil society, local businesses, upper tiers of government) in formation and functioning of IMC;
- relationship among member municipalities as well as between members and IMC office;
- perceived effects of cooperation; and
- dynamics of cooperation, including membership changes and evolution in areas of cooperation.

In addition to the responses to the survey, contextual data on each of the IMC institutions were collected, such as: year of establishment, number of member municipalities, population of member local governments, and – as far as it was possible – the size of the annual budget.

The applied method allowed broadening the comparative research perspective from general descriptive to empirical and from the general frame of inter-municipal

Table 3: Basic characteristics of collected empirical material

Country	Form of IMC covered by the survey	Number of responses	
Czech Republic	Microregion	179	
Germany (Brandenburg)	Special Purpose Associations (Zweckverbände)	25	
Iceland	Survey directed at 50 largest IMC institutions in the country	37	
Poland	Union of Municipalities (związek komunalny)	65	
Portugal	Inter-Municipal Association	16	
Slovakia	Microregion and Joint Municipal Office	58	
Slovenia	Joint Municipal Authority	36	
Spain (Catalunya)	Inter-Municipal Association (mancomunidad)	50	

cooperation to the level of single entities. As explained in the previous section, this in-depth analysis has been considered as relevant in providing important information on the functioning of inter-municipal arrangements. However, we need to be aware of some limitations in our data. First, in spite of the efforts described above, the selection of forms of IMC studied in individual countries has been, to some extent, driven by subjective choice of the researchers, and since we focus on one form only in each of the countries, the picture is evidently not complete. Second, in order to study the relationship among member municipalities, attitudes of citizens and effects of collaboration we had to rely on the self-assessment of the employees of offices of IMC organizations. This picture is certainly meaningful, but in the future it would be valuable to supplement it with the perspective of individual local governments as well as of users of the provided services. Third, when constructing the questionnaire, we were trying to find a common frame of topics which would be relevant for all covered countries. This means that we avoided some questions which would be very interesting in the context of individual countries, but which would be useless (or not easy to understand) in other contexts. A good example of this is provided by the motives of entering IMC arrangements. In some countries – such as Slovakia, Slovenia or Iceland - it would be interesting to investigate the inter-play between policies aiming at amalgamation reforms and joining IMC entities seen as a defensive strategy against the pressure for up-scaling administrative boundaries. But in some other countries (e.g., Poland or Portugal) in which municipalities are usually much larger, that element is not a part of public debate and has little to do with IMC development.

Nevertheless, we think that the collected empirical material presented in the following article, provides a new perspective and significantly enriches our understanding of the abovementioned research questions, namely regarding forms, motives, mechanisms and outcomes of collaborative arrangements in local governance.

4. The level of institutionalization of IMC institutions

In the previous section we explained that the joint survey was conducted in each of the included countries on the inter-municipal institutions which are the most formalized, hard institutional structures of cooperation.

In our article we distinguish between two (inter-related) notions: formalization and institutionalization (*hardness*) of IMC entities. The first refers to the formal arrangement for cooperation. The fully formalized entity has a legal form which is provided in the national legislation and is based on formal rules (e.g., of decision making, approving the budget) and it has a permanent character rather than ad hoc or single-project oriented. Naturally, in practice, it may happen that the organization is abandoned after the goals of cooperation are achieved, but the initial assumption and legal form provide the establishment of the organization for an undefined period.

The second notion – institutionalization (or *hardness*) refers, in addition to its formal structures, to the level of effort and resources invested in the operation of joint activities. We assume that the more effort and investment involved the more likely it is that the organization will continue its existence and operation. We operationalize those efforts by the size of the joint budget, number of staff formally employed by the joint organization, ownership of premises (properties, in our case ownership of the premises in which the IMC office is located) by the IMC entity and operating own web-site.

As we explained before, in each country we have selected the IMC form which has been the most formalized, leaving the level of institutionalization as an open, empirical question. In our questionnaire we asked several questions which may help to envisage that variation.

Table 4 illustrates the huge variation of institutionalization of IMC organizations both among and within the studied countries. On a first look, the data in Table 4 suggest that the Portuguese and German IMCs have the hardest institutional structures. They all have their own web-sites and well over half of them own the property in which IMC offices are located. German IMCs have also the highest number of full-time employees, while in Portugal it is considerably lower (lower, not only when compared to Germany, but also to the mean value for Poland and Iceland). But the information in Table 4 gives visual rather than systematic information about the institutionalization of IMC institutions.

To investigate the variation of the researched cases of IMC in more detail we constructed an index of institutionalization, which was calculated for each of the surveyed inter-municipal organizations³, and which was based on the following variables: (1) having an office in premises owned by IMC institution; (2) operating separate web-site of the IMC institution; (3) number of full-time employees of IMC per

³ As the precise case-level data on German IMCs is lacking, the remaining analysis is limited to seven countries only.

Table 4: Variation in formalization of the studied IMC institutions

	Pct of IMC in own (not rented) offices	Pct of IMC with own web-site		per of ful mployee			nual bu 000 of e	J		nual bud capita (e	•
	Pct (not	Ω ο	Mean	Min.	Max.	Mean	Min.	Max.	Mean	Min.	Max.
Czech Republic	3	79	0.6	0	10	6	0	443	0.5	0	34.5
Germany (Brandenburgh)	68	100	28.3	0	132						
Iceland	44	81	21.5	1	200						
Poland	15	80	16.5	0	242	4,631	1	147,748	26.9	0.3	26.9
Portugal	72	100	10.2	1	28	3,258	812	9,986	15.5	3.4	45.1
Slovakia	22	69	6.7	1	32						
Slovenia	8	39	1.1	0	5						
Spain (Catalunya)	14	44	8.8	0	172	1,632	2	23,698	50.4	1.6	241.3

Source: Authors' own calculations on the basis of survey of IMC offices

1,000 population of the area served by the IMC (total population of member municipalities); and (4) annual per capita budget of IMC institution expressed as percentage of the mean per capita budget of municipal government in the given country. In that way, the variable illustrates the relative importance of IMC in provision of municipal services in each of the cases.

Each of the variables has been standardized, using z-score method in which:

$$Z_{ij} = (x_{ij} - \text{mean}(x_j) / \text{standard deviation } (x_j)$$

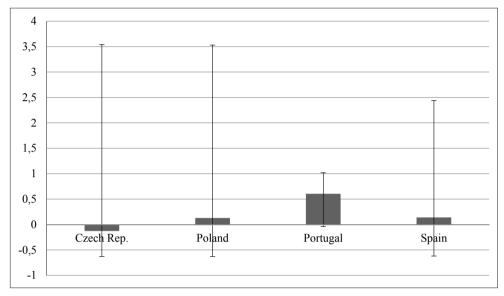
where:

Z_{ii} – standardized value of variable j for unit i;

 x_{ij} – original (non-standardized) values of variable j for unit i.

The summary index of institutionalization is a mean of standardized values of the four considered variables. The score above 0 indicates a level of institutionalization which is above average and a score below 0 indicates a level of institutionalization below average for all researched IMC institutions. The variation of the index is shown in Figure 1. The highest mean value of the index has been found in Portugal, while in the other three countries it is similar, with the lowest value in the Czech Republic. At the same time, the within country variation is by far the lowest in Portugal. The analyzed Portuguese semi-regional IMC institutions are semi-compulsory, i.e., although there is no legal obligation to join, the incentives are sufficiently strong to convince each of municipalities to enter the cooperation institution. As this type of IMC is defined by the central government and national legislation, the variation among individual cases is unsurprisingly lower than in other cases. The Polish Union of Municipalities (*Związki Komunalne*) is on the opposite extreme as regards the vari-

ation among cases. This is not unexpected if we remember that Polish unions are voluntary, that there are no strong extern incentives, the regulations concerning their creation and functions are relatively loose, and municipal governments have great amount of flexibility to decide upon their functioning. More startling is the similarly high level of variation among Czech microregions, whose establishment is supported by central government and their internal structure, which seems to be more regulated by national legislation.

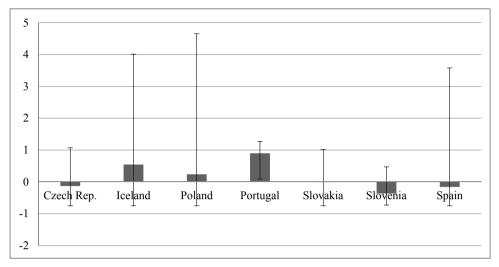


Note: The index is based on being an owner of IMC office, operating an own web-site, number of full time IMC employees and size of IMC budget (see details in the text). Bars illustrate the mean value, the figure shows also the range of variation between minimal and maximal value in each of the countries.

Figure 1: Index of institutionalization of IMC Source: Authors' own calculations based on survey of IMC offices and IMC budget reports.

The main problem with the full version of the index is that it requires detailed information on budgets and number of population served by each individual IMC institution. Such information is hard to get in several cases and our team has been successful in four countries only. That is why we use also the simplified version of an index, which is based on three variables only: (i) ownership of an office premises; (ii) operating own web-site; (iii) number of full-time employees in IMC institutions (absolute number). This index omits less available data on budget spending and number of population served by IMC, so it may raise doubts of over-simplification in defining the level of hard institutionalization of IMC. But on the other hand, data is available for seven, and not just for four countries. An important justification of using the simplified version is the fact that, for the four countries in which both indices are available, the correlation between the values of the full and simplified index is very high (+0.728 – significant on 0.001 level). It confirms it does not distort the overall pic-

ture in a very significant manner. The levels of such simplified indices are presented in Figure 2.



Note: The index is based on being an owner of IMC office, operating an own web-site, the number of full time IMC employees. Bars illustrate the mean value, the figure shows also the range of variation between minimal and maximal value in each of the countries.

Figure 2: Index of IMC institutionalization – simplified version

Source: Authors' own calculations based on survey of IMC offices and IMC budget reports.

Taking into account the simplified version of institutionalization index, Portuguese IMCs are still examples of 'the hardest' entities in our research, but they are followed by IMCs in Iceland and Polish Unions of Municipalities. Slovenian institutions are on the other extreme, while the Czech, Slovak, and Spanish ones are between the two extremes of the ranking. The highest within country variation is observed, once again, in Poland and Spain as well as in Iceland. On the other hand, the group of Portuguese and Slovenian entities is the most homogenous.

However, the most interesting question is not about the variation itself but about the consequences of variation. How and to what extent more institutionalized IMCs differ from those less hard (or more fragile) in terms of their every-day operation? The neo-functionalist theory suggests that harder institutional structures support trust, higher dynamics of membership in IMC and spill-over to other areas of cooperation (Jensen, 2010). The last question assumes the direction of casual relationship, which we cannot test with our data. One might argue that in some cases the direction might be opposite – harder structures may produce a different environment for cooperation. But, nevertheless, identifying the relationship between these two values brings a new and interesting knowledge on internal mechanisms of cooperation. Network governance theory (Klijn and Koppenjan, 2000) allows us to expect that more institutionalized entities will bring more interest of politicians from member municipalities, resulting in higher satisfaction of the members of the club and leading to more visible benefits.

Simple correlation analysis between the index of institutionalization and the opinions of individual respondents of our survey (working in IMC offices) largely confirms those expectations. In particular, IMC entities with harder, more institutionalized structures have – according to our respondents – the following features:

- bring higher satisfaction of member municipalities (correlation 0.099*4);
- membership 'in the club' is considered by member municipalities more important for their overall activity (correlation 0.201***);
- (positive) outcomes of activities of IMC are more clearly visible and easy to evaluate by the members (correlation 0.184***);
- more often spill-over to new areas of cooperation among members (correlation 0.171**);
- stimulate higher interest of councilors in IMC activity (the higher is the institutionalization of the IMC the lower the difference between the level of interest in conduct of own municipality and the activity of the IMC correlation 0.172**). Interestingly, the relationship is statistically significant in case of the level of interest of councilors, but not of ordinary citizens of member municipalities. It might be related to the low transparency of the IMC operation for citizens, the issue discussed in the literature (e.g., Wollmann, 2008, on France and Germany; Borraz and Le Galès, 2005, on France), also based on analysis of data collected in our survey (Gendźwiłł and Lackowska, 2018).
- They are more dynamic also in the sense of members' turn-over. There are more new municipalities 'joining the club' (correlation 0.115*), but also more leaving the IMC entity (correlation 0.210***). It may indirectly reflect higher interest in the activity of the IMC institution. In more loose and less active IMCs, the issue of formal membership is considered less important.

The results presented above are based on correlations calculated for the merged data file including cases from all 7 countries. But very similar results are confirmed by the tests conducted separately for cases from individual countries with the highest number of responses in our sample: Czech Republic (N=179), Poland (N=65) and Slovakia (N=56).

5. Post-typology research on IMC

Inter-municipal cooperative arrangements vary in shape, scope and level of organizational integration. The only evident feature of IMC in Europe is its diversity. As a consequence, cutting the complexity down would be the right advice. Hulst and Van Montfort's (2007) typology shows how widespread are different forms, but also reveal the limitations of such an approach. The multiple dimensions that need to be tak-

⁴ Here and in the following parts of the article * means correlation coefficient is significant on 0.05 level, ** – significant on 0.01 level and *** – significant on 0.001 level. As it was explained before, the total number of surveyed IMC entities (N for our correlations) is 466.

en into account make it a difficult task, and would 'complexify' a more complete typology to a point where it would not fulfil the task of simplifying the characterization of the different types. The level of formalization, complexity in scope and in number of actors involved, its voluntary or compulsory nature are just a few examples of the dimensions to take into account to depict the diversity of IMC arrangements. Furthermore, most of these dimensions are not the result of mere positive/negative or limited number of options. They are, in fact, a continuum of possibilities, which would not translate easily into a traditional, objective *typologization* of reality.

Typologies must be constructed in order to offer broad applicability to attain consistency, which requires a high degree of distinctness and interpretation, needed to explain the observed facts, and the adequacy of a model to action. The resulting typology would present what real institutions eventually do in real situations and should be coherent with its theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, typologies should be rational, which requires that the ideal types must be constructed in a way that the institutions would perform their functions in the typified way, as if they had a clear and distinct knowledge of all the alternatives. This condition asserts that there is something about institutional design that makes it behave in predictable ways. This allows typologies to generalize about regularities.

In addition, 'typological theories can guide researchers toward questions and research designs whose results will be pertinent to problems faced by policymakers' (George and Bennett, 2005, p. 7). Designing such research puts emphasis on the criteria for comparability. Comparative case study findings, particularly those concerned with identifying institutional forms, cannot be taken as representative of the institutional arena in general. However, they provide strong and broader lessons on diversity, providing information to establish general propositions, with important information on the research questions, in order to obtain reliable propositions that can contribute to theory.

However, to venture into explanation of different forms of IMC arrangements, and as a consequence of their diversity in multiple contexts, one would need to set boundaries, not always consensual in literature, but strong enough to be accepted as delimiting different types from one another. Within the existing contested boundaries and available typologies on IMC, we only see attempts to partially capture the whole picture.

Though we acknowledge the advantages of typologies, both for description of an observed phenomenon and for research design purposes, we claim the need to move forward in the IMC research agenda and avoid the categorical and descriptive debates on the stability of cooperative arrangement forms. We suggest that existing typologies do not cover all possible situations and leave behind relevant information and knowledge.

Moreover we do not think that it is feasible to produce another alternative typology of the same type, which would have similar format and would replace older pro-

posals. The main reason is that there are several dimensions which should be taken into account. Additionally, on some of those dimensions we cannot simply divide existing IMC entities into two or three simple clusters, since there are many different possibilities, reminding rather a continuum of the variable spread-out between two extremes. In other words: old style typologies through the reduction of diversity would miss important elements.

So, instead of the classic typology we suggest a 'post-typology' approach which consists of listing dimensions which have to be taken into account when we analyze any given form of IMC or when we try to compare various forms within or across the countries. This list of dimensions includes:

- 1. The level of *formality* starting from loose informal networks of local governments going through contracts (formal ad-hoc agreements) to hard, permanent structures, being separate legal entities.
- 2. The level of compulsion starting from totally voluntary bottom-up initiatives going through the voluntarism limited by various types of pressures exerted by regional or national governments (also in the form of incentives of 'not to refuse' nature) going to compulsory networks. But even compulsory cooperation arrangements vary in terms of local autonomy for example the level of local discretion in selecting partners, deciding upon internal management structures or precise scope of cooperation.
- 3. *Purpose* on the one extreme we have single-purpose and, on the other, multi-purpose cooperation. But some legal forms allow both options, so the empirical variation would be even larger than expected.
- 4. Number of *partners* inter-municipal cooperation by definition has to involve at least two partners, but there can be many more. So we can have bilateral, tri-lateral or multi-lateral cooperation.
- 5. Nature of members of the club we concentrate on purely inter-municipal forms, but there might be also other forms which allow multi-level membership (e.g., also upper tier governments in addition to several municipalities) or multi-sector (e.g., Local Action Groups promoted by EU structural funds in rural areas, which assume partnership consisting of a group of municipal governments, but also with members recruited from private business and societal organizations).
- 6. Areas of cooperation e.g., joint administrative services, public transport, water provision, waste management, etc. The areas of cooperation may be characterized also in another way: whether they are focused on joint delivery of services local governments are responsible for, or whether they are focused on joint investment projects. The third option is softer cooperation (e.g., in joint marketing, promotion, representation of joint interests or lobbying).

6. Exploring a new research agenda⁵

Teles (2016a) has recently suggested a set of new research questions that need to be addressed, claiming the need for strong foundations for future research on the role, capacity and significance of inter-municipal cooperation. The existing literature and comparative research, together with the ongoing theoretical discussions highlight some of the problems in the attempt to clarify the core features of inter-institutional cooperation. The difficulty in drawing a theoretical framework to provide guidance for comparative research is not as different as it has been in general comparative local government studies. However, in the specific case of IMC, more empirical work is necessary to test some of the arguments regarding its claimed advantages and future work is required to examine the influence of inter-institutional partnerships, both at the political and managerial level, on the ability of inter-municipal structures or entities to participate in policy arenas. The deficit of comprehensive comparative studies, and the different meanings and practices of inter-municipal cooperation in each country are only relevant in comparative research as long as they provide insights on how it addresses, in different ways, the problems of cooperation. Therefore, research should also address the mechanisms of institutionalization, particularly, at a first stage, the significance and intensity of cooperation arrangements in Europe. Knowledge would gain not only from these comparative studies, but also from in-depth case studies exploring special situations of cooperation, since research also needs to provide useful information.

This article, in particular, was focused on a specific aspect of cooperation: how institutionalized are the inter-municipal arrangements and what is their relative importance in local policy-making and provision? We argued that the set of eight countries included in our study represented a fair variation of the institutional relevance of IMC in Europe, and – moreover – it explored 'unusual suspects' in the hitherto comparative research literature, allowing us to raise new questions and suggest future research agendas.

Both the increasing incidence of the phenomenon and the lack of systematized research covering several new countries are important justifications for the relevance of further research on IMC in Europe. This will give an opportunity to several scholars and practitioners to get in touch with the most recent and novel research on inter-local collaborative arrangements. More than a long neglected topic, this will certainly become a fast growing field of research in public administration and political science, with expected impacts both on scholars' research interests, and on practitioners and policy makers' agendas.

⁵ For more extensive discussion on the new research agenda see also Swianiewicz and Teles (2018).

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