2 Typologies of Local Government Systems

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Local government systems are usually perceived as independent variables when considering (possible) differences in recruitment patterns, professionalisation, the position of mayors in local and multi-level governance arrangements (or horizontal and vertical policy networks), the interpretation (or notion) of democracy, problem definition as well as attitudes and opinions towards decentralisation or centralisation and reforms (‘modernisation’) of the public sector (‘new public management’). However, a decision on the most suitable conceptualisation or typology of local government systems for joint research such as that undertaken here is more problematic than might be assumed: firstly, a lot of typologies are available in the scholarly debate, and secondly, it proves difficult to apply the available typologies because none of them cover the whole spectrum of countries included in this study, and many do not include the ‘new democracies’ in Middle-Eastern Europe. Therefore, existing typologies will necessarily have to be adjusted and updated.

In the following, different typologies will be discussed, offering a rationale for the use of two in particular for our analysis (i.e. the Hesse/Sharpe and the Mouritzen/Svara typology) and outlining a third approach proposed on the basis of the two cited typologies. The reflection on different typologies of local government systems is grouped around two issues: vertical power relations, that is, between municipalities and upper-level government(s) – and horizontal power relations, between the council and the mayor and/or other political and administrative leaders within city hall.

2.1 The vertical dimension

Comparative analysis of local government systems employs different distinctions according to vertical power relations or the distribution of competencies between the local level and upper layers of government. Bennett (1989; 1993a; 1993b) makes a distinction between
- a dual structure where at the local level central government agencies and the municipalities exist side by side but with different competencies (as in the UK),¹
- fused systems where local authorities and their competencies are determined by local as well as by upper-level government and
- mixed systems (as in Denmark or Sweden).

Bennett classified the ‘new democracies’ in Middle-Eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic) as moving towards fused systems. This typology has not been adopted widely in the past, mainly because all European countries should, based on Bennett’s typology, have been subsumed either under fused systems or those moving towards fused systems, with the exception of the UK (dual) and Denmark and Sweden (both mixed). This would seem too simplistic to capture differences not merely in connection with certain aspects of vertical power relations but also possible effects resulting from such relations. Furthermore, fused systems have been thoroughly changed during the last decades: In several countries territorial (new layers of government, amalgamations etc.) and functional (decentralisation, devolution, new public management) reforms have been implemented (Kersting and Vetter 2003), and thus increased the differentiation among “fused systems”.

Page and Goldsmith (1987; see also Page 1991 and Goldsmith 1993) and – later – John (2001) draw a distinction between the North and the South by considering the ‘relation between the number und type of functions allocated to sub-national government, the legal discretion open to local policy-makers and the access of local politicians to the central state’ (John 2001: 26). Their key idea is that there is an inter-relationship among the functions allocated to local government, the respective discretion given to local authorities and the access of local politicians to the central state. Clearly, the policies enacted as well as the corresponding leadership roles fulfilled by mayors may differ sharply, depend-

¹ The concept of ‘dual structure’ has been strongly disputed by P. John (2001) especially regarding the UK. John argued (referring to the related ‘dual state thesis’):
‘Observers need to be cautious about the ascription of Britain as a dual state – or any state as dual – as this proposition has been stated in the theoretical literature (Bulpitt 1983; Saunders 1980), but has not been tested. Far from being a separated polity, the UK has always had a high degree of contact between central and local government in professional and policy-making communities (Dunleavy 1981; Rhodes 1986). Central government took initiatives through its field offices and politicians in powerful local parties, such as in Birmingham and in London, had an influence on national politics. Once researchers examine central-local policy systems in detail and according to policy sector, there is less difference in political relationships than the allocation of functions to tiers of local government would suggest’ (John 2001: 33).