

How to deal with conflictual central policy incentives? Regional governance dynamics in Flanders unpacked.

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Abstract

In most European nation-states, addressing societal challenges demands collaborative approaches and broad actor coalitions. The regional level, often cited as conducive to policy integration, serves as a platform for diverse societal objectives. Despite extensive literature on policy initiatives at the regional level, the configuration and interweaving of the regional space as a result of divergent central policy incentives remain understudied. This paper addresses this research gap by focusing on Flanders, where diverse regional policy initiatives and reforms are shaping a complex ensemble. Specifically, we examine the interplay of three recent central Flemish policy initiatives. We analyze how these initiatives interact, potentially leading to conflicts or innovations, and highlight tensions and trade-offs underlying them. By studying this interplay, we aim to contribute to understanding conflict dynamics in regional governance arrangements and their implications for the academic debate on planning and governance.

Keywords: intergovernmental collaboration, rescaling, regional governance, conflict

Work in progress

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Introduction

In many national contexts, societal challenges are more interconnected than ever, necessitating the development of new collaborative approaches and the forging of broad actor coalitions. The regional level is often highlighted in the literature as a suitable scale to achieve various forms of policy integration (Gualini, 2006) and is framed as a platform upon which diverse societal objectives can be realized by facilitating interaction among different actors and policy levels (Fricke & Gualini, 2018).

Various policy initiatives within many EU states attempt to concretely address these societal challenges at the regional level. Policy incentives range from those situated in the relational sphere of projects and programs on one hand to more systemic reforms that are territorially oriented on the other, intervening at the basic tiers of government (Zimmerman et al., 2020). However, the actual configuration and interweaving of the regional space resulting from various, often diverging policy incentives and particularly the tensions that such a fragmented setting can cause, often remains overlooked in literature. To address this research gap, we will focus on the following research questions: how does the region take concrete shape through various and diverging policy initiatives? What roles do central government administrations play in that regard? And to what extent does this interplay of policy initiatives leads towards conflicts and contradictions at the regional level?

This contribution focuses on a specific set of policy initiatives descending from the central government to the regional level. It zooms in on the concrete interplay that can arise between these various policies, examining how they interact with each other, the potential for conflict or innovation, by exposing the tensions and trade-offs that underlie them (Christmann et al., 2020).

Evidence is presented from Flanders (northern part of Belgium), where diverse regional policy initiatives and reforms are being implemented, which gradually seem to form a complex ensemble. This contribution therefore hopes to contribute to the role of conflict in regional governance arrangements within the broad sphere of (spatial) planning.

More specifically, we delve into the interplay of three central Flemish policy initiatives which seem to develop somewhat in parallel within the current regional governance set-up:

1. The establishment of Flemish mobility regions as part of a broader reform of central mobility planning, establishing a more intense intergovernmental cooperation for addressing urban mobility & planning issues.
2. The Flemish regionalization reform ('regiovorming') as an overarching central policy initiative, promoting the rescaling of intermunicipal cooperation by installing a fixed 'reference region' scale.
3. A new policy approach being developed within the spatial planning domain, aimed towards intergovernmental contractualization via 'region deals', along which local and central stakeholders make goal-oriented and implementation-focused agreements.

We approach the interplay of these different policies towards the region as a specific policy arena where, through confrontation and mutual influence, a new space for collaboration and innovation can emerge, albeit with room for conflict, through which various trade-offs and power dynamics between heterogeneous interests and positions can find its way (Kuhn, 2021; Rangoni, 2020).

Conceptual framework

In this section, we examine how tensions and conflicting policy approaches towards the region are conceptually addressed within the literature and what frameworks are provided to contextualize our own analysis. We focus on both literature that addresses conflicting interests between public sector administrations, as well as conceptual approaches that frame the region as an intermediate coordination space more broadly.

The region as conflicting central interests

One way in which conflicting policy incentives are framed in the literature is through the theoretical concept of 'modes of governance'. Witzel (2019) demonstrates how issues encountered by practitioners within planning practices can be related to organizational and management changes within administrations, which may reflect a broader change in public sector governance, such as neoliberalism, marketization and New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010). A commonly used framework in this regard concerns the concept of 'governance modes'. Hierarchy, market, and network are distinguished here as ideal types that refer to ways in which organization, coordination, and governance are approached within a particular sector or administration (Hedegaard Sørensen & Gudmundsson, 2010).

Hierarchy in this context refers to a model in which clear dependent relationships are formed between superiors and subordinates, with coordination occurring through an authoritative system of commands and routines. Market refers to an interaction among actors based on self-interest, wherein clearly defined property rights, competition, price signals, and forms of contract formation serve as regulatory elements. A network mode refers to the premise that each participant is mutually dependent on others to achieve desired goals, necessitating reciprocally supported actions. The coordination mechanism crucial within this mode involves mutual trust to foster a collaborative approach.

Addressing conflicting central policy incentives also involves framing them within a broader debate on decentralization and the capacity of central government to maintain a monopoly on control and political power. From this perspective, Ayres et al. (2003) demonstrates how divergent approaches from central government towards the region can be understood through a so-called 'pathology of departmentalism', which has consequences for regional working. Their findings suggest that several influences, including administrative culture, political leadership and historic legacies have therefore played a residual part in determining departmental approaches to decentralization.

Central departments are characterized by their own histories, institutional biases, priorities and leadership and have long-term policy preferences that influence how they respond to new policy initiatives (6 et al., 2002). These will determine the extent to which departments are influenced by pressures to decentralize or devolve functions and the tier of government to which responsibilities are transferred. Their analysis reveals a picture in which departments face contradictory and uneven pressures to meet national delivery targets, respond to demands for

the better co-ordination of policies with a regional dimension and refine policies to more accurately reflect regional conditions.

The region as a gap

Several authors provide insights to frame the region as an intermediate coordination space from a more generic perspective. A common approach in this regard is Hajer's concept of policy making in an institutional void (Hajer, 2003), where clear norms and rules are absent according to which politics is to be conducted and policy measures to be agreed upon.

According to this approach, territorial synchronicity is increasingly being challenged, which necessitates greater attention to the legitimacy of policy interventions. Within the loss of territorial synchrony, actors have to collaborate by transgressing institutional boundaries. As a result, trust cannot be assumed. Policy and politics are therefore not simply about finding solutions for societal problems, but also about finding formats that generate trust among mutually interdependent actors. Within this perspective, the emphasis lies on the limits of knowledge in the light of 'wicked' policy problems and the identification of unawareness as about the provision of knowledge. Policy implementation therefore requires active coordination and an awareness of mutual interdependence.

Hyotonen (2019) frames this issue within the domain of planning via the formation of so-called 'policy vacuums'. According to the author, policy vacuums are connected to the increase of short-termism and market-reactivity in spatial planning. Vacuums have therefore three intertwined dimensions: (1) horizontal, (2) vertical, (3) pervasive. The horizontal dimension arises from inter-municipal rivalry, when there is no governmental scale responsible for planning that transcends municipal boundaries. The vertical dimension refers to potential inconsistencies or mismatches between spatial planning instruments at different scale levels. The pervasive dimension refers to increasing growth-oriented dynamics, land-use practices, particularly among smaller local governments lacking sufficient planning resources.

The region as unfinished institution

Thirdly, we highlight approaches that focus on the framing of the institutional setting of the regional space. Durose (2021) frames the institutional design of governance arrangements at the urban level within a scope of 'incompleteness'. Incompleteness is conceptualized through three alternative design logics: instrumental, pragmatic, emergent.

An instrumental design logic views incompleteness as a 'description', representing a foundational or reformative moment in the institutional design process. Here, institutional design is considered 'incomplete' on its path toward becoming 'complete'. Incompleteness may arise from stalled, failed, or abandoned institutional design efforts, or from a lack of attention to enforcing institutional rules.

A pragmatic design logic approaches incompleteness as 'action', aimed at achieving 'good enough' design. It recognizes the inherently partial and incomplete access to information that designers face, their limited cognitive capacity to model and analyze all possible alternatives, and the stickiness or path dependencies of existing institutions. Finally, an emergent design logic views incompleteness as part of a deliberate and purposeful design strategy. The objective of such a strategy is for institutional arrangements to evolve over time and through usage. In

this approach, incompleteness is valued as a design principle in itself, indicating that intentional incompleteness can be a strategic choice in institutional design.

Incompleteness in institutional design can also be allied with the agonistic perspective in planning literature that values democratic opposition and seeks to realize it through an institutional design process imbued with the principles of contestation, contingency and interdependence (Kuhn, 2020). Agonistic planning theories critically oppose communicative planning theories, which fail in their view to adequately address conflict and overly focus on consensus and cooperation, leading towards a depoliticization of planning theory. Kuhn (2020) distinguishes in this regard three ideal types of dealing with conflict: (a) avoidance, (b) occasion for consensus and (c) acceptance. The agonistic planning approach is situated within the latter type and distinguishes itself from the comprehensive and communicative approach by developing a proactive relationship with conflict, which can assume a transformative function and act as a catalyst for social and institutional change (Mouffe 2013).

Our analysis builds upon the theories and approaches discussed above. Within each case, we therefore highlight the governance mode being developed, how the policy interests of central departments affect the region, and how various actors approach the institutional shaping of the regional space.

Methodology

The analysis in this study is based on a 5-year research project on regional governance arrangements in Flanders (the northern territory of Belgium), which included the three cases discussed. For this purpose, we employed an exploratory and qualitative research approach.

Considering the Belgian federal state structure and after several rounds of Belgian state reform, the Flemish Government is now responsible for most aspects of mobility and spatial planning policy and is the central state in the intergovernmental relationship with the local governments. Given the research focus on divergent central administration approaches, we focus therefore on three cases of Flemish policy initiatives towards the region, which are directed from various central administrations, being the Flemish administrations of Mobility, Environment (spatial planning), as well as Domestic Governance. The three cases can be considered as critical cases of regional reform in public administration in recent years (Yin 2018), being set up by central government during the past legislatures and involving both local and central government actors. Also, the cases concern reforms that are not limited to a few parts of the country, but cover a sufficiently wide area to also detect variation in dynamics between different regions within the same case.

Regarding data collection, interviews were conducted with a broad group of stakeholders and involved actor groups, such as regional administrative coordinators at the central level, civil servants involved in the design of the three policy reforms, officials and politicians of the municipalities involved and staff working within inter-municipal cooperative structures. All the respondents were involved in one of the three cases in some way. Following a bottom-up approach, the focus in the interviews was on both the central motivations behind the policy reforms and assessments of the desired policy objectives, as well on the practical experience of implementing the reform, the consequences this had for cooperation, and the impact on the relationships between the involved actors.

In addition to the interviews, a document analysis was conducted. The selected documents analyzed provided additional insight into the development of legislative framework and included various policy documents, supporting policy research and regional guidelines created by central administrations. Also the data collection builds from a involvement as action researchers in the reform process. The researchers took part as experts both at local level and the Flemish level of the central departments involved in the reforms via the Flemish Policy Research Centre on Governmental Innovation (Steunpunt Bestuurlijke Vernieuwing) and also as members of expert teams brought together to reflect and advise the Flemish government regarding regional reform trends and developments in general.

Analysis

We use the following structure for our analysis. Firstly, the basic characteristics of each of the three discussed cases is outlined below. Subsequently, we analyze the interplay and interaction that develops between the three policy initiatives, building on the distinct dimensions within the developed conceptual framework.

Cases description

1. Mobility regions

The mobility regions were initiated in Flanders since 2019 as part of a new policy approach in Flemish mobility planning.

The new principle of basic accessibility, that underlies the mobility regions reform, propagates a new policy frame, based on the concept of an integrated network approach of public transport designed along the idea of 'combi-mobility' (Weyts, 2015). Basic accessibility prioritizes the development 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 various types of public transportation in the region.

With the creation of 15 mobility regions, the Flemish government decided to deconcentrate delegated tasks for mobility planning and policy to 15 groups of local governments via mobility region councils. So far, those tasks were not part of the autonomous realm of local governments. Local governments therefore are now operating as a politico-administrative deconcentrated branch of the central government. The set of delegated tasks includes an advisory role, a role of co-decision with central government and a role of new responsibilities for the mobility needs of targeted groups. These tasks are therefore a mix of own responsibilities, giving advice to the Flemish government and tasks related to the follow-up, but always within a central framework that allows the Flemish government to overturn decisions taken by the mobility region council. The mobility region councils are co-chaired by a political chairperson from one of the local governments and a chairperson from the central department of Mobility. The final approval of a regional mobility plan, however, is still done by the Flemish Government.

Therefore, the mobility region is based not only on a group of local governments within a territory: all the Flemish actors responsible for mobility, within the political realm of the present minister for mobility, have to take part also in the mobility region. In that regard, the mobility regions do not only affect the cooperation between (groups of) local governments, but also have a strong impact on the Flemish government itself. This impact includes an administrative reorganization, a rearranging of working methods, budgets and the reallocation of the staff in

the Flemish Department of Mobility (MOW), the Agency of Roads and Traffic (AWV) and the Flemish Public Transport Company (De Lijn). That is another novelty compared to the historical institutional heritage: the mobility region institutionalizes the intergovernmental cooperation between the two levels of government that really matter, politically: local government and Flemish government (De Rynck et al., 2021).

From an institutional perspective, the mobility reform is facilitated by the introduction of a new framework in which basic accessibility as a new policy approach is anchored by decree (= a Flemish law) (Flemish Government 2019). The decree of basic accessibility, adopted and implemented in June 2019, stipulates the creation of 15 new mobility regions and mandates cooperation between all local governments in each of the 15 regions.

The decree also gave rise to a new geographical demarcation of mobility regions. The delineation process of the mobility regions was the output of an administrative cooperation between the Department of Mobility and the Department of Environment (competent for spatial planning), a new form of cooperation and an exponent of the pressure towards a more integrated approach towards central policy making. In the first phase, 19 draft regions were delineated based on mobility flows, functional relations and existing types of regional cooperation. In a second round, this proposal became the object of a political deliberation which resulted in a final delineation of 15 mobility regions. The political deliberation did not change the map drastically: the technical-scientific work was retained by approximately 80% in the final choices and the political interventions were not at odds with that work. The scale of the 15 regions, the cooperation and the competences of those regions got therefore all imposed and regulated by the Flemish government itself. This is new as it breaks with a strong tradition of sacrosanct 'autonomy' of local government and the free choice for intermunicipal cooperation (Schraepen et al., 2021).

From a local perspective, a key innovation of the mobility regions reform is that the local authorities should have a more transparent and formal say in and control over Flemish mobility budgets. The idea is to give local authorities more influence in public transport on their territory, with a strong say in shaping the two 'lowest' layers of the hierarchical transport model. This approach stands somewhat in contrast with the previous non-transparent lobbying practices from individual local governments towards the Flemish mobility actors in order to obtain more investments and a better public transport offer for their own local territories. Interestingly, many respondents from local government argue that thanks to their involvement in the Mobility Region Councils, the contacts between Flemish mobility actors and (groups of) local government are now much more numerous and intense than before (Schraepen et al., 2023). There seems to be a growing mutual understanding of local political interests and positions, leading towards a growing mutual trust and an enhanced cooperation between the local and central level throughout the mobility regions, on the condition that agreements within the transport region are subsequently sufficiently honored by ministerial engagements at the central Flemish level.

2. Regionalization reform

The current Flemish government Jambon (2019-2024) stated a strong position on the reform of regional governance. The political ambition is set forth to counter administrative burden and the fragmentation of interorganizational collaborative arrangements on the regional level. In the end, the objective is to achieve fewer but stronger regional cooperation structures, a more simplified government apparatus and a strengthened domestic governance.

These political objectives retraces a long-standing policy discussion regarding the intermediate level in Flanders. A turning point in this debate was a regional 'screening' that was conducted about a decade ago. De Rynck et al. (2011) provided an extensive overview of intermunicipal partnerships, informal forms of cooperation, structures and demarcations in which local government were involved at the time. The inventory resulted in a total amount of 2,229 arrangements involving local governments, and an average of 68 arrangements per Flemish municipality (308 at that time). The study raised a broader awareness among stakeholders regarding the complexity of the Flemish intermediate level, which was framed by some as 'administrative cluttering', and the multitude of activities taking place here. This imbroglio of arrangements at the regional level and the lack of coordination created a sense of administrative burden among local government and led to the identification and problematization of several governance issues at that intermediate level: democratic legitimacy, compartmentalization, insufficient transparency, inefficiency, and a general lack of clarity.

As a response, central government aspires to tackle these problems through the regionalization reform. In order to achieve greater coherence at the intermediate level, the Flemish government set up a policy framework for intermunicipal and intergovernmental cooperation to evolve towards fixed regions, so called 'reference regions' (Flemish Government, 2020). Reference regions are conceived as a scale coordination instrument in which all forms of intermunicipal and supra-local cooperation should be clustered. The underlying policy assumption here is that bringing more coherence and consolidation at the intermediate level by rationalizing intermediary structures will lead to a more simplified and transparent government apparatus, fewer mandates and a strengthened, more effective cooperation at the regional level. As a general rule for scale coordination the so-called 'Russian doll principle' is postulated which states that intermunicipal cooperation should coincide with one or more reference regions or fit within one region, with the aim of enabling coordination at the scale of the reference region (Descamps, 2023).

Despite the ambition to increasingly concentrate and align collaboration forms on the scale of the reference regions, the Flemish government does not want to develop the reference regions as a new tier of government with its proper institutions. The regions do not replace the still existing provincial intermediate level and so far reference regions are merely conceived as a coordination level for various forms of intermunicipal and supra-local cooperation. The Flemish government itself declares to 'lead by example' and will gradually adjust its regulatory framework for intermunicipal cooperation to align with the reference regions (Flemish Government 2021). In addition, central government imposes local government by decree to align all their cooperation forms within the scope of the reform to align with the reference regions by the horizon of 2030.

3. Region Deals

The Flemish spatial policy currently finds itself in a somewhat schizophrenic situation. On the one hand, significant gaps can be identified in terms of the central policy framework, while on the other hand, we witness also an abundance of policy trajectories, studies, and experiments.

A striking example of a central policy gap is the Spatial Policy Plan Flanders, initiated in 2011 to succeed the Spatial Structure Plan Flanders from 1997, yet in 2024, it has not been fully completed (only a strategic vision has been approved). This situation is often framed as a lack of political courage to proceed with tough central decision-making, for example, regarding the

protection of open space and the compensation issue for affected landowners (Coppens & Vloerbergh 2017). At the same time, we observe that similar trends can also be observed in neighboring countries. The Netherlands, often seen as a model case in spatial policy and governance, has also been grappling with its National Spatial Vision for some time. Despite both spatial visions formulating good intentions for major societal transitions, they seem incapable of formulating task-oriented, binding goals, particularly for other policy domains, let alone integrating them all into one central spatial policy.

On the other hand, we observe that spatial challenges in Flanders are being addressed within various trajectories and projects by heterogeneous actor constellations. Declerck (2024) distinguishes three prototypical working methods through which spatial societal challenges in diverse policy domains are addressed: (1) incubation projects & platforms; (2) regional area processes & programs; and (3) implementation programs. Within these projects and programs in various qualities, we observe that the concept of 'region' is interpreted in different ways. Intergovernmental area-specific cooperation is on the rise, and the establishment of regional partnerships to address spatial challenges is recommended at regular intervals by various authorities and advisory bodies. All these interpretations given to the concept of 'region' articulate area-based governance forms in which cross-administrative level consultation and area-specific customization are central.

Within this context, thought is also being given to the elaboration of a 'region deal' - instrument within the spatial domain, in analogy to a similar policy instrument in the Netherlands. The focus is on the development of a contractual approach. The region deal as a possible new instrument in spatial policy is conceived as a policy agreement between different administrative levels. Based on negotiations at the regional level, area-specific agreements are established on spatial choices and cooperation, in accordance with spatial policy plans at the different administrative levels, and which determine how, by whom, and with what resources they will be realized.

Essential to this is that the Flemish central government negotiates with other administrative levels on which instruments will be used to address specific spatial challenges within a particular region, and who will undertake and finance which commitments. In the preparatory study work on this approach, the following principles are proposed (Schoups et al., 2023).

A regional deal is conceived as a form of intergovernmental cooperation. This entails that multiple administrations are involved in the deal, since it is an agreement between various actors. Given the intergovernmental nature, it concerns a government agreement, namely an agreement concluded between parties of which at least one is a government. In addition, a regional deal is goal- and implementation-oriented. It must contribute to the strategic central objectives through area-specific agreements. Given the regional scope of the region deal and the principle of intergovernmental cooperation, the agreements made must exceed the purely local level. Finally, the principle of co-financing is essential. This means that each party participating in a regional deal is expected to make a financial or other contribution. It is conceived not merely a subsidy vehicle from Flanders but a form of co-governance, also financially.

Comparative analysis

Conflicting interests at the central level

When comparing the central policy choices across the various cases, we observe that a lack of coordination and some conflicting administrative visions seem to hinder the potential of the three cases.

In the case of the mobility regions, the lack of coordination between the central administrations of mobility and environment results in a rather weak connection between spatial planning and mobility planning, which potential is not being fully realized. Despite the strong emphasis on coordination and cooperation in the policy discourse of the reform, we note that the effective coordination of mobility planning with the spatial planning policy remains rather limited in practice, with the historically compartmentalized policy approach from the Flemish government still having a strong impact on the current functioning of the policy arrangement.

The ambition of the mobility regions to develop a more efficient mobility system is strongly interwoven with the issue of counteracting urban sprawl, thus requiring a close collaboration between the domains of mobility and urban spatial planning. At an administrative level, we indicated that the delineation of the mobility regions was the result of a close collaboration between the top administrators of both departments, resulting in a mutually agreed scale as a basis for future regional development planning. This collaborative relationship between both domains at the administrative levels is in itself also a breakthrough in administrative traditions, but it stands in contrast with the conflictual interactions within the political sphere of government. For this reason, the delineation of the mobility regions was not retained as a policy scale for spatial planning. The former minister of spatial planning refused to integrate her own plans for a better integrated subregional spatial planning in the concept and the institutional form of the mobility regions. This exemplifying pattern illustrates the way the Flemish Government works and how opposite interests try to find their way throughout the Flemish administrative and political constellation. This feature is reflected directly in the organization and ambitions, but also the ambiguity of the mobility regions.

Also, the relationship with project-based regional arrangements remains unclear due to the policy deadlock and the lack of approved central policy framework within the Flemish spatial policy plan. Moreover, the regionalization reform failed to lead to a breakthrough in the planning domain, as the spatial planning department largely remained outside the scope of this reform, due to numerous exceptions and deviations resulting from political deals between Flemish ministers and departments. Exploring the option of working with regional deals can thus be interpreted as a strategy to make progress within this current setting without getting bogged down in delicate political discussions. This appears to be a politico-administrative strategy also adopted in the Netherlands to develop the Region Deals approach here.

The region as a gap?

When we examine within the three cases how the region is shaped as an intermediate coordination space, we note that certain aspects appear to have been strategically left open, with various causes and motivations seeming to exist for this.

The quest for operational spatial policy frameworks in Flanders, as well as in the Netherlands, appears to be manifestations of a broader crisis within central spatial planning. While both articulate good intentions for all major societal transitions, they appear to lack the capacity to establish binding policy objectives for sectoral administrative actors. Therefore, there also seems to be no consensus on which tasks should be addressed at the central level versus the decentralized level. In addition, the divide between 'pure' spatial planning objectives and goals

for other sectoral domains such as water, mobility, healthcare, or energy appears to be increasingly difficult to draw in practice. As a result, many thematic challenges end up at the regional level through bottom-up pressure from local actors, despite a clear central mandate on this matter.

Both within the case of the transport regions and the regional reform, we observe that the institutional design and the governance of the region raises many questions among local stakeholders. The central approach to establish the region not as a governing layer, but as a coordination layer, means that at the regional level, autonomous decisions cannot be made or decisions cannot be implemented autonomously. Therefore, regional consultative bodies for implementing regional agreements usually remain dependent on the policy choices of local, but mostly central policy actors, as well as the instruments and resources they mobilize for this purpose. The lack of clear central task assignment, particularly within regional reform, is a subject of local criticism, given that central administrations, for the time being, do not adopt a clear, joint positioning and commitments towards the region for their own policy objectives. Leaving the institutional design and governance open can therefore also be interpreted as a strategy to conceal the lack of coordination among central administrations, as well as a way to cope with significant differences in central and local path dependencies and administrative cultures.

Institutional incompleteness: room for innovation?

The lack of a clear task assignment and a fixed governance structure poses certain challenges for regional actors but also provides some degrees of freedom. Therefore, a policy space seems to emerge that can be creatively shaped by diverse coalitions of actors, potentially leading to forms of policy innovation.

The discussed cases are policy incentives centrally coordinated by various administrations in parallel, but converge in the region and are generally taken up by the same actor coalitions here, such as regional intermunicipal entities. The latter can therefore act as a 'boundary spanner' to facilitate effective policy linkage for integrated policy coordination. In this way, mutual influence between the different policy tracks, although centrally not initiated in that respect, does indeed occur at the regional level in practice. For example, local experiences with regional cooperation within the transport regions served as a test case and prototype for subsequent collaboration within the reference regions. Furthermore, test cases addressed in the development of regional deals are subsequently taken into account within some reference regions as breakthrough projects to further strengthen intergovernmental cooperation here.

In line with this, we also observe that the framing of the institutional arrangement forming at the regional level is differently contextualized by various actors, wherein we can discern both instrumental, pragmatic, and emergent argumentation lines.

At the local level, the descriptive design view towards the region seems to prevail, wherein the current institutional design is framed as incomplete, given that regional challenges and obligations are primarily oriented towards local authorities. From their perspective, the central Flemish government itself does not sufficiently engage within the region and fails to fulfill its commitments adequately.

From the central perspective of domestic governance, a more pragmatic logic can be discerned. The regional reform, in particular, could only be approved at the level of Flemish government

by allowing a series of exceptions and deviation rules for sector administrations, resulting in many regional collaborations de facto falling outside the scope of this reform. The current institutional set-up is seen as the most achievable, requiring compromises to be made to obtain approval at the level of the Flemish government.

Additionally, within regional reform, and somewhat in contrast with the mobility regions, some elements of an emergent design line can also be discerned. The central government does not impose a uniform governance structure on regions but allows room for regional coalitions to develop their own approach in the shaping of a regional mayors' conference. This seems to be a starting point for a central approach that is more focused on facilitating and empowering local innovations, rather than stifling them.

Conclusion

We started this contribution from the observation that the region is increasingly being emphasized as a scale for policy coordination and interaction between various levels and coalitions of actors. However, the role of central government towards the region and the compartmentalization resulting from a fragmented approach of various central administrations are elements that are not adequately addressed in the literature. Therefore, this contribution focuses on the interplay emerging at the regional level from the various policy initiatives set up from central government to the regional level and the conflicts and tensions such an approach brings about.

Our analysis focuses on three central policy initiatives that interact at the regional level within the current set-up and together form a complex ensemble. On the one hand, mutual confrontations and tensions can be observed, but also opportunities arise to develop new models of collaboration and policy innovation. The analysis demonstrates that the region cannot only be understood as a space for policy alignment among various stakeholders, but also from conflicting approaches and interests stemming from central policy agendas. It also reflects broader policy issues around planning and which policy ambitions can be successfully addressed at which policy scale. Unraveling the various responses and attitudes of central administrations towards the region is crucial to accurately assess the policy dynamics at this level.

From the literature, we witness that the region is framed within a broader context of an institutional void, where clear norms and frameworks are lacking to achieve political policy alignment. We note that this issue is also present in the dynamics that occur at the regional level in Flanders. However, our analysis leads to the question of whether this institutional setting can be merely considered as a given, or if it stems from a strategy of the central government to avoid taking a uniform stance towards the region due to conflicting interests among central administrations and sectoral logics.

In line with this, the question arises as to how the central government should deal with the current policy dynamics and conflicts at the regional level in the future. Within our analysis, we observe various institutional responses to dealing with conflict, ranging from seeking consensus in planning and scale on the one hand, to accepting various governance models and diverse central path dependencies on the other. The future government will determine which rationale will prevail and whether further steps towards coordination and integration of policy initiatives will be taken, or whether, from a rather agonistic perspective, more degrees of freedom will emerge that promote a further fragmentation of the region.

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