

Chapter 11

Italy:

Remapping Local Government from Re- Allocation and Re-Shaping to Re-Scaling

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades Italy faced a long political transition, which displayed its effects also on the institutional policy of this country. The changes occurred in these years on local and meso-governments will be scrutinized in this chapter looking at the different strategies adopted. Remapping local government in Italy fundamentally meant three different 'R-approaches': a Re-allocation of legal power (decentralization in the light of NPM) (from 1990 to 2000); a Re-shaping of the institutional setting (devolution) in favour of subsidiarity (from 2001 to 2009); a Re-scaling of functions in terms of recentralization (upscaling) and a search for an optimal territorial scale in times of economic crisis (since 2008).

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, Italy faced a long and never really ending political transition, which reflected its effects also on the institutional policy of this country. The changes occurred on local and meso-governments will be scrutinized in this chapter looking at the different strategies – here defined as reallocation, reshaping and rescaling – adopted all along this period.

According to scholars (Sharpe, 1993; Baldersheim & Rose, 2010; Denters & Rose, 2005; Keating, 2013), the redefinition of domestic sovereignty and development of meso-government can include a range of different strategies. The re-allocation concerns a new settlement of tasks and powers without changing the framework, but redefining the weight and the degree of freedom of each level of government. Differently, the reshaping includes a deep revision of the institutional arrangement and implies

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a different intergovernmental system between centre and periphery; hence reshaping is ambitious and may envisage a radical change in the institutional arrangement (e.g. unitary vs. federal State). The rescaling pertains, instead, to a limited re-arrangement of tasks and duties between centre and periphery by shifting either from the upper to the lower levels (down-scaling) or viceversa (up-scaling); it thus concerns the increasing or decreasing of power's delegation in the light of the economic performance and cost saving (scaling).

All three strategies (re-allocation, reshaping and rescaling) are not necessarily interrelated and they reflect a different and contingent political idea of the subnational territorial sovereignty. Italy experienced all these strategies as an effect of an almost permanent institutional policy and according to the different political agendas that promoted a rearrangement of multilevel governance in the country. Three major reform periods concerning a remapping of local governments can be singled out: the first one dating back to the early 1990s; the second one taking place a decade later, in the early 2000s; and the third and most recent reform wave occurring in the years of crisis and dating to 2008-2014. The different reform waves should not be seen as parts of a unique, planned and coherent framework aimed at designing central/local relations in Italy. It could be thus highly misleading to consider and interpret the changes occurred in the last 25 years in the central/local relations, as well as those in the role of the local government in the general Italian institutional setting, as a whole, integrated phenomenon. Each reform period, has been in fact triggered by (sometimes very) dissimilar causes and by different political backgrounds and socio-economic conditions. It is, in fact, not unusual to have the Italian institutional reforms labelled as “unintended”, “fragmented”, “incremental”, almost “preterintentional” (Dente, 1985; Diamanti, 2008): that is as a scattered ensemble of provisions.

The main argument of this chapter is that these different periods were marked by the three above-mentioned different approaches about remapping local government. At first, the reforms aimed at a re-allocation of (mostly legal) powers, according to the downscaling approach typical of the New Public Management (NPM) (Bobbio, 2005). In a second phase it was the centre-periphery balance of power to be under revision through a Constitutional reform oriented to devolution: a re-shaping of the institutional setting deeply changed the previous intergovernmental relations (Brunazzo, 2010; Baccetti, 2011) with a particular attention to subsidiarity. A third and most recent phase tended instead to re-scale local government's functions (Baldini & Baldi, 2014) by exploiting a policy window created by the global crisis. In this phase, a stronger coordination and steering role of the central state to the detriment of the local levels is to be detected, as well as a remapping of local government aimed at coping with financial constraints and at defining an adequate scale for managing functions.

The main steps of these three reform periods as well as their approaches and main effects on local level will be addressed. The chapter will be organized into five major sections. In the first section an explanation of the institutional setting of Italian local government will be provided along with an overview of the pre-1990 background, that is before the first reform period. Later, after an analysis of the reform waves, which, in the 90s and in the early 2000s respectively, reallocated powers and reshaped the institutional framework (section 2), a snapshot on the most recent reform process during the years of the global crisis will follow (section 3). An assessment of the main features of the last reform wave (2008-2014) will be then conducted (section 4). The last section will be devoted to the perspectives and the future of Italian local government opened by the most recent reform (section 5). Some final remarks will be concluded in this chapter.

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