



Metropolitan Governance in Switzerland: Cooperation and Change

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What does metropolitan governance look like in a small and heterogeneous country with 7.5 million inhabitants consisting of 26 cantons and 2,700 municipalities? What happens to the strong commitment to decentralization that offers the same opportunities to all regions? What role does cooperative federalism and the autonomy of the municipalities play in the future? These are questions Switzerland must address in the years to come. In Switzerland, agglomerations – as cities and their surrounding municipalities are called – and metropolitan regions are small. The largest agglomeration is Zurich with 1.1 million inhabitants, followed by Basel and Geneva with approximately half a million. The smallest agglomerations like St. Moritz and Interlaken have only 10,000 inhabitants.

Agglomerations and metropolitan regions in Switzerland have rather complex internal territorial subdivisions. The 50 agglomerations consist of almost 1,000 municipalities. Parts of an agglomeration or metropolitan region may be in different cantons or even in other countries. This, of course, does not make cooperation any easier: not only do the different countries insist on their sovereignty but the cantons and the municipalities also claim autonomy.

Within the federal system, Swiss cities are confronted with problems in both the vertical and horizontal dimension. Vertically, they find it difficult to place their concerns directly on the agenda of national politics, since according to standard federal procedures there is no direct link between the national and the municipal level. National politics are – so it is claimed – more about dealing with the interests of far-away mountain regions and small cantons than solving the problems of the cities. Horizontally, the relationship between the cities and surrounding municipalities is an issue. Facilities and services provided by the cities are used by a significant number of citizens living outside the city and many of the problems, such as regional traffic, planning and environmental issues, cannot be solved independently. The problems are further aggravated by the tax autonomy of the municipalities. Around all the big cities there are a quite a few municipalities in which the tax burden is considerably lighter than in the city itself.

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Recent reforms of the Swiss political systems have tried to improve the situation of the cities. Three of these reforms are particularly significant. First, agglomerations are now explicitly mentioned in the 1999 Constitution. Article 50(3) states that in their activities, the federal authorities have to consider the special situation of cities and agglomerations. In the eyes of the cities this gives them direct access to national politics. This idea, however, is not viewed with equal enthusiasm by cantonal authorities. Second, in 2004 Swiss citizens accepted a reform of financial equalization and task allocation between the Confederation and the cantons. This reform will not only balance out excessive production costs in mountainous regions as the old system already did, but it will also allocate additional money to those cantons suffering from high per capita costs for social welfare and infrastructure due to problems of city centres. These problems include high concentrations of elderly, unemployed, immigrants and drug addicts as well as higher expenses for public security and public transportation. Third, in 2001, federal authorities launched a strategy for the agglomerations which should focus federal politics on the problems of the agglomerations, improve cooperation in the vertical and horizontal dimensions and promote the integration of Swiss cities into the network of European cities.

Two basic challenges to metropolitan governance in Switzerland, however, will remain on the agenda. Both are related. The first has to do with global competition, the second with internal organization, solidarity and democracy. If it is true that a country needs cities that compete in the global

economy and that global cities have to achieve a certain size, then it is difficult to see how Switzerland will play an important role in the future. Zurich (banks, insurance companies), Geneva (international organizations, banks) and Basel (chemical industries) have their strong areas of specialization but remain very small. If they have to become internationally comparable agglomerations or metropolitan regions, their territory would have to cover most of the country and would considerably disturb the internal equilibrium.

The second challenge is about bringing together municipalities with different standards of living and different tax burdens without infringing on their autonomy and the democratic rights of the citizens. If an amalgamation also means a higher tax burden, then no majority will ever approve. And since Swiss citizens are used to deciding directly on many political issues, smaller municipalities are always reluctant to join a bigger one where they will be enveloped by an overwhelming majority.

First steps to address these challenges have been made. In 2001, the three government levels created the tripartite Conference of Swiss agglomerations to promote vertical cooperation in policy fields relevant for metropolitan areas. This rather informal conference involves the Confederation, the Conference of Cantonal Governments, the Union of Swiss Cities, and the Union of Swiss Municipalities. For the first time, the strictly horizontal Swiss federalism gave way to a partnership across all three levels of government. For some observers it is the first sign of a trend away from the traditional cooperative federalism towards multi-level governance. And, as a result of the federal strategy for the agglomerations, the canton of Bern elaborated a promising new model. In a regional conference, the city of Bern and its surrounding municipalities are represented by their mayors and there are votes held across all the municipalities belonging to the region on important issues. Different weights are given to the mayors and their municipalities, depending on the size of the municipalities. At first, the conference limited its activities to transport, regional planning and cultural activities. Whether these endeavours will be successful or not remains to be seen. But if federal countries are less likely to have dominant cities and are generally more inclined to find solutions when it comes to integrating culturally, economically and socially different areas on democratic grounds and for mutual benefits, who else but federal countries will be able to sketch the way towards good metropolitan governance?