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TESTING TIMES

COVID-19 AND DEVOLUTION IN EUROPE

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INTRODUCTION: LESSONS FROM EUROPE

Ed Turner / Carolyn Rowe / Luke Raikes

The UK is highly centralised by international standards. To take a one of many metrics, only 5 per cent of tax is under local control, compared to 13 per cent in France and 31 per cent in Germany.[1] This centralisation is evident especially in England, home to 85 per cent of the UK's population, though Wales and Northern Ireland's settlements are also notably centralised.

This centralisation comes at a cost we can all observe. First, levels of regional inequality in productivity, income and health are high in comparison with other European countries and have widened in recent decades.[2] Second, satisfaction with political structures is rather low.[3] Other countries are far from perfect, but now, as the government turns to questions of devolution, is an important time to learn what does work, and doesn't work, for some of our closest neighbours.

The UK in context

UK centralisation is longstanding, and many government attempts to address it have been tokenistic. For example, early on in the Conservatives' most recent tenure, the decision to allow councils to retain more business rates was oversold by ministers: according to Eric Pickles, secretary of state at the time, it would "free councils from their enslavement to government grants".[4] In fact, the impacts were minimal.

But some government initiatives have started to make a difference, especially in recent years. From 2014, we have seen more combined authorities take shape, the agreement of deeper devolution deals, and the visible leadership provided by metro mayors – though all against the

backdrop of local government austerity. The emergence of an increasingly powerful and visible subregional tier of government in England's major city-regions is undeniably a break with the past, and has now led to a step-change in both the powers and prominence of tiers of political authority below the national level in England.

Since its election in July 2024, the Labour government has made devolution a high priority. This enthusiasm was evident years before the election in Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future, followed by the devolution offers in Power in Partnership and the Labour manifesto itself. With Labour in government, the devolution white paper set out how areas like Greater Manchester can deepen their devolution deals, from increased flexibility over existing devolved spending to the prospect of control over innovation, planning and rail. Alongside this, the government wants to widen devolution out to all of England.

The government has notably held back from any real fiscal decentralisation. This is a crucial means by which areas can fund economic development independently of central government and help grow the UK economy while shouldering the risk and responsibility themselves. It is commonplace in all other major countries. And yet it is almost totally absent from the government's current plans. This suggests that the battle is yet to be won for a lasting shift in power away from Westminster.

Lessons from Europe

Recent years have seen renewed debate in different European countries about political authority below the national level. The Covid-19 pandemic may be well behind us now, but it was a shock which affected all countries, and so revealed how different central and local systems operate together. In particular, countries had to balance strong incentives for national measures to promote public health with effective local implementation, and there were also important debates about whether rules should be consistent across countries, or should be flexible to respond to different infection rates in different areas. Sometimes, this has led to lasting changes: in Germany, meetings between state 'minister presidents', the chancellor, and key national ministers grew greatly in prominence and have continued to have a high profile.

The aim of this collection of short essays is to dive into debates about devolution across Europe, often triggered by experiences with the Covid-19 pandemic, to inform the UK as it considers reform in this area. There are three key themes which may prove particularly instructive for UK policymakers.

First, mature coordination, mutual respect and political alignment between tiers of government is important. Marius Guderjan discusses this in the case of Germany, arguing that: "the intensity of intergovernmental exchange was extraordinary." He describes high-level political meetings, and notes that while their outcomes were not legally binding, they did prove politically binding upon participants. Several authors emphasise mutual respect and political alignment. In relation to Italy, Arianna Giovannini, Antonella Seddone and Davide Vampa argue that: "imposing reforms on regions from the centre, or seeking to thwart the voice of regions on reforms and processes that directly affect them, tarnishes the potential of devolution". Similarly, in her analysis of Spain, Caroline Gray mentions the problem of "interregional competition" and "blame shifting between central and regional government". Simmering demands for independence, particularly in Catalonia, make mature dialogue harder, and she compares this to recent challenges between the Scottish and UK governments. With Labour dominating the metro mayor landscape, in leadership in Wales, and potentially in the ascendancy in Scotland, there may be a window of opportunity for this political alignment. Though, as Anderson's essay on English devolution notes, even in circumstances where the majority were not politically aligned with the UK government, mayors "provided visible place-based leadership", and had some success at shaping policy. Anderson points to the importance of "principles of mutual trust and respect and undergirded by a sense of partnership".

Second, there are real, tangible benefits from devolution, just as there are costs from centralisation. Raul Magni-Burton, in his discussion of French centralisation, notes that a highly centralised system of government still led to the profound regional inequalities which were at the root of the political discontent manifested in the "yellow vest" movement. In contrast with the more decentralised system in Germany, France's strongly centralised response in the first wave of the pandemic proved ineffective, and was subsequently changed. Schnabel, in her nuanced discussion of the impacts of decentralisation upon policy, challenges the view that decentralisation necessarily leads to unequal outcomes, which is a key concern of its opponents. She notes that poorer localities seem to have benefited from having greater economic powers in some circumstances, while in Spain and Italy, decentralised healthcare may have actually reduced inequalities.

Third, fiscal decentralisation is vital. In her contribution, Studdert notes that the UK is an "extreme centralised outlier". For Studdert, too often debate about fiscal decentralisation focuses on "straw men" and that it can narrow gaps between regions, rather than increase them, as many assume. It can be popular and indeed can drive political participation below the local level, and it need not lead to higher levels of taxation. For Studdert, variants of fiscal decentralisation that guarantee sub-national governments a share of certain tax revenues should be considered. She argues that there should be a

clear element of solidarity, so that structurally weak regions are not trapped with perpetually lower levels of revenue, following the German example. Anderson picks up the same thread, pointing to the risks of a "Treasury-driven centralising mindset" in the future. Concerning Spain, Gray offers a note of caution: a very high level of decentralisation has led at times to greater calls for separatism or to lengthy political stalemates. However, this would flow from a degree of regional fiscal power that is most unlikely to be pursued in the current context in England.

Next steps for the UK

With legislation expected in the coming months, there are some important lessons the UK government can draw from recent debates in Europe. The message is clear: decentralisation tends to work well to address regional disparities, but there needs to be effective coordination, and fiscal devolution is crucial.

The essays in this collection point to a compelling need for political boldness and ambition – without clear political leadership, forces of inertia will prevail, to the lasting disadvantage of the UK and its nations and regions.

1. SPAIN: TRIALS OF 'CO-GOVERNANCE'

Caroline Gray

Spain's experience of the pandemic suggests that while centralisation is not the answer, decentralisation is not a panacea either. To improve governance, a devolved territorial model must be underpinned by certain key principles and features that were absent in Spain, such as the need for effective, institutionalised cooperation mechanisms between different layers of governance that can, as far as possible, rise above competitive dynamics and partisan politics. This offers important lessons for England in particular as it seeks to implement the 2024 English devolution white paper and develop relations across central government and the mayoral combined authorities.

Following a brief outline of Spain's territorial model, this essay identifies and explains its key shortcomings, particularly those that manifested themselves during the pandemic. In doing so, it considers how these insights might inform approaches to devolved governance more generally.

Spain's territorial model

Spain is divided into 17 autonomous communities (hereafter 'regions') which have their own substate governments and parliaments and extensive devolved competences, including health and education. While the regions are divided into provinces and localities, substate powers are largely concentrated at the regional level. Devolved spending powers far outweigh the level of fiscal devolution (the power to raise taxes) in all but two regions, the Basque Country and Navarre, which have separate systems of extensive fiscal autonomy for historical reasons.

The 1978 constitution provided the starting pointing for the shift from a highly centralised state to an increasingly decentralised one by setting out various rules and procedures to be followed, but it did not determine an end to the process. A handful of competences were specifically attributed to the

central state under article 149, while the regions could in theory assume all others.

Devolution ended up going much further than many might initially have expected, largely due to political bargaining dynamics. From the mid 1990s onwards, it became standard practice for regionally-based nationalist parties with representation in the Spanish parliament to extract devolution gains in return for propping up minority central governments. While these parties were mainly based in the Basque Country and Catalonia, the two regions with the strongest substate nationalist movements, other regions then sought to acquire the same powers as well.

Such extensive devolution has often led the Spanish territorial model to be described as quasi-federal, even though it lacks the coordination and cooperation mechanisms typical of a federal model. The senate (upper house) of the Spanish parliament is not a territorial chamber. Moreover, the intergovernmental fora specifically designed to bring together regional governments and the central government, mainly the Conference of Presidents (Conferencia de Presidentes), established in 2004, along with other lower-profile mechanisms like sectoral committees, have been seen as weak and often primarily administrative in nature. Central-regional government interaction has tended to take place first and foremost through informal, bilateral channels and has been heavily shaped by partisan dynamics, while region-to-region interactions have traditionally been characterised more by competition (eg for funds) than by collaboration. A significant point of contention – one voiced particularly by the regions governed by substate nationalist parties – is that regional governments are ultimately subordinate to the central government, and have no veto power should the central government decide to reduce their powers. This has led to calls for a revision of Spain's territorial model to establish and institutionalise a clear delimitation of powers and the notion of 'shared rule' where appropriate.

How Spain's territorial model shaped its handling of the pandemic

Spain's handling of the pandemic was notable for its shifts from an initially decentralised approach to a heavily centralised one, before it sought to strike more of a balance through what the Spanish government called 'co-governance'.[5] The first stage, beginning in January 2020, was short-lived, as uncoordinated measures taken by each regional government depending on the prevalence of the virus in their territory failed to curb its spread. Centralisation followed when the prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, declared a 'state of alarm' which came into force on 14 March 2020, initially for a period of 15 days (the maximum allowed under the relevant Spanish legislation)

but eventually ending on 21 June, following a series of extensions. Spanish law (specifically Organic Law 4/1981) allows for a time-limited recentralisation of powers under a state of alarm in extraordinary circumstances, expressly including epidemics. During this period, the Spanish health ministry assumed sole responsibility for health policy decision-making in relation to the pandemic in every region and imposed a nationwide lockdown.

While regional governments were, by and large, initially supportive, dissatisfaction grew with each successive extension of the state of alarm as the logistical inefficiencies of a centralised approach and political contestation over the hollowing out of regional competences came to the fore. In response, the Spanish government itself proposed the notion of 'co-governance' as a way of transitioning towards a new normality once the most acute months of the pandemic were over. This involved establishing the means and fora for central and regional governments to share responsibility for decision-making in regard to the handling of the pandemic, and gave the regions a notable degree of flexibility in designing and adapting their strategies to tackle it.[6] Nevertheless, several regional governments continued to perceive the central government's approach as primarily top-down rather than giving the regions a proper role in decision-making.

Debates over what form exactly 'co-governance' should take continued in the aftermath of the pandemic, when decisions had to be made over how to use Spain's share of the NextGenerationEU funds to support the economic recovery. The central government granted the regions autonomy in some key areas, such as deciding which of the projects in their regions (of those submitted for consideration) should receive funds from the regional allocation. Some, however, felt that was not enough. Specific complaints, reported in the Spanish press at the time, included the fact that the central government's criteria for deciding the distribution of funds per region in the first place were not transparent, and that most of the monitoring of the implementation of the funds after the regional governments had selected the projects was to be done by the central government. Overall, the specific sectoral committee that the central government set up to bring together the regional and central governments to debate and discuss all matters in relation to the EU funds was not seen as giving the regions a sufficient role in influencing decision-making. It often descended into competition between the regions over regional allocations, mirroring longstanding problems with the use of sectoral committees as intergovernmental fora in Spain in general.

Lessons from the Spanish case

The Spanish experience tells us much about the challenges of getting multilevel governance right. First and foremost, effective vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms between the different layers of governance in a multilevel state are fundamental and need to be institutionally embedded. Recentralisation may have been inevitable in the Spanish case in March 2020 given the gravity of the situation and need for swift action in the form of a nationwide lockdown, but proper coordination mechanisms might have enabled powers to be returned to the regional governments earlier, who were closer to the local reality and better equipped to manage the situation on the ground in their territory.

At the same time, the Spanish experience suggests that decentralisation should not mean hollowing out central government institutions to the point that they lack the ability to coordinate different layers of government across the state. Health policy and management had been in the hands of the regions for nearly two decades by the time the pandemic broke out, with the central health ministry retaining responsibility for formulating basic health principles to ensure equality and for foreign health affairs.[7] By the time of the pandemic, its role had been reduced to the extent that it had difficulty obtaining operational data from the regions and lacked the experience, resources and personnel to perform a central coordinating role.[8] Each region had developed its own data systems and management models, which were often not compatible, and with no structure in place for that data to be fed upwards to the central health ministry. It is clear that effective coordination mechanisms across government layers are essential in a decentralised state, and many studies had pointed to their absence as a major flaw of Spain's territorial model long before the pandemic.

The relevance to England is clear. While the powers of England's substate authorities are not nearly comparable to those of Spain's regional governments and the hollowing out of central government is not a likely risk, the two systems do bear a key similarity. Devolved governance in England, as in Spain, has been characterised by bilateral deals and predominantly informal intergovernmental interactions, which has led to differences in the level of responsibilities that substate authorities have and power imbalances among them.[9] In this context, England, like Spain, needs institutionalised intergovernmental coordination mechanisms to develop effective state-substate cooperation and foster collaboration among substate authorities.

In Spain, the real challenge remains how to devise and put in place such mechanisms in a country long defined by interregional competition and centrifugal dynamics, not to mention frequent blame-shifting between

central and regional government levels: this might be compared to the inherent difficulty of coordination between a Scottish nationalist government committed to Scottish independence and a Westminster government committed to the union. Criticisms of the Spanish government's conception of 'co-governance' evidence the range of different political views on the form this coordination should take. What the Spanish socialists see as 'shared governance', some regional governments see as a top-down process still too heavily led by the centre, while the Spanish right is against any conception of 'shared governance' in the first place.

Such debates point to another thorny question. Could genuine power sharing between the central and regional governments, requiring serious attempts at collaboration rather than competition, ever really work with such different visions of what the Spanish state should be? While the Spanish socialists are generally open to working towards a more federal-type arrangement, their vision of power sharing does not go as far as what some regions seek. What the main Basque and Catalan nationalist parties ideally want is a more confederal-type arrangement (if not full independence) between themselves and the central government, with equal veto power on each side, rather than their voice being one among 17 with the central government as overall coordinator.

The Basque and Navarran Economic Agreements provide the closest possible example of equal relations in central-regional government relations. Both sides have full veto power in relation to all relevant decisions and legislation and these regions have significant fiscal autonomy. This comes with significant positives in terms of the fiscal responsibility it encourages, and it has thus prevented the kind of blame-shifting over finances that contributed to fuelling the independence drive in Catalonia. Nevertheless, the arrangement has often resulted in prolonged stalemates (for example, over the settlement of the Basques' annual contribution to the Spanish state coffers) which have often only been resolved as a quid pro quo when a minority central government has needed the Basque Nationalist party's support in other areas.[10] Extending this type of relationship to other areas would be highly problematic if circumstances meant one side had the upper hand and could force the other to capitulate.

A final lesson we might therefore draw from the Spanish experience is that working towards a German-style federal model, to strike a balance between unity and diversity, might not be a viable way forward in a country with such different views on what form central-regional government relations should take. This may be an ill omen for the UK, given that Scotland, in particular, has a government committed to independence, but a more positive sign for intergovernmental relations within England. Unburned by debates over the integrity of the state, there is more scope to develop

constructive vertical and horizontal relations among central government and the different strategic authorities while respecting diversity.

2. GERMANY: IN TANDEM

Marius Guderjan

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the 16 Länder enjoy constitutionally guaranteed powers over certain policy areas, including schools, universities, police, culture, sport, leisure activities and right of assembly. Contrary to the devolution of legislative and fiscal powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, however, Germany has taken the opposite path, and over time transferred more and more competences from the Länder to the federal government (Bund).

Territorial politics in Germany are characterised by harmonisation pressures to guarantee the uniformity of living standards, enshrined in the German constitution. Yet, federal laws that are implemented and administered by the Länder require their approval via the Bundesrat (the second chamber of Germany's parliament). The administrative and co-legislative powers of the Länder means that the federal government cannot simply overrule them and interfere with their area of competence. The unique nature of Germany's integrated federalism resulted in a well-established machinery of intergovernmental cooperation and coordination. At the top, the minister presidents of each Land meet four times a year or during extraordinary sessions in the Conference of Presidents (Ministerpräsidentenkonferenz). In addition, there are sectoral conference of ministers (Fachministerkonferenzen) in areas such as education, culture, economy, finances, and health. These meetings are vital for coordination of policies between the Länder but also support the vertical engagement with the federal government

As they were well-practised in working together, the different governments cooperated intensively to deal with Covid-19. Whereas in many countries central governments took on responsibility for managing the public health crisis and the economic impact of pandemic, in Germany the Länder took the initiative and pushed for the federal government to take action. Prior to the declaration of a nationwide emergency on 25 March 2020, the Infection Protection Act of 2001 provided the Länder with the competence to adopt containment measures. At the start of the pandemic, individual measures concerning the restriction of public life and the closure of schools and

nurseries were taken by the Länder and local authorities, which are responsible for civil protection, emergency management, hospitals, essential public services, the authorisation of public events and demonstrations, statistics about infection rates and the enforcement of quarantines.

On 25 March 2020, when the Bundestag passed the Act on the Protection of the Population in the Event of an Epidemic Situation of National Importance, it declared an "epidemic situation of national significance" authorising the federal ministry of health to take health safety measures on a nationwide basis to combat the coronavirus by ordinance without approval of the Bundesrat. The German government then could introduce the first lockdown (mid-March to mid-April) and border controls for neighbouring countries. It also procured medical equipment for hospitals and other medical and care facilities (and later the vaccine) and passed a series of successful measures to stabilise the economy, protect businesses (e.g., temporary aid programmes), preserve jobs (e.g., short-time work) and support households (eg, payment of extra allowances), and transferred an enormous amount of money to the Länder, which helped securing the support of the minister presidents.

Many important legislative decisions still had to be agreed by the Länder through the Bundesrat. Article 74(19) of the Basic Law defines "measures to combat human and animal diseases which pose a danger to the public" as a "concurrent" legislative power. This gave the federal level the right to pass regulations that are administered by the Länder and local authorities.

In order to coordinate the stringency and timing of their public safety measures, the federal and the Länder governments met frequently throughout the pandemic. Most prominently, the Bund-Länder Conference brought Chancellor Merkel together with the minister presidents to exchange views and take decisions that were not legally binding, yet still had a binding effect on the governments. At the same time, the meetings of sectoral ministers responsible for education, health, economic affairs and home affairs discussed specific issues.

 Mutual trust and the willingness to look beyond their own interests certainly helped to produce consistent solutions and manage potential conflicts in the earlier phases of the pandemic. However, as the pandemic went on, intergovernmental relations became more politicised and federal and state governments cooperated but also competed over public safety measures.

At the beginning of May 2020, after the first nationwide lockdown, the federal government and Länder decided to rely on localised restrictions depending on infection rates within local authorities (a "hotspot strategy"). The Länder were given more room for divergence to respond to the specific

needs within their jurisdictions and started to adopt different safety rules to protect their regional economies and subsequently deviated from the agreements with the other Länder and the Bund. Some Länder in Eastern Germany, such as Saxony-Anhalt, only followed the examples of other Länder when their hand was forced by a high rise in infections.

As the pandemic started to escalate again, Bund and Länder imposed a second nationwide lockdown from December 2020 to March 2021. By the end of the second lockdown, the Länder were divided over the speed of relaxing the restrictions and again deviated from the agreements with the German government – until between April to June 2021 the "federal emergency break" provided uniform rules across Germany depending on infection rates. As Covid-19 got more and more under control and less politicised, the Bund and the Länder could rely on their previous experience and coordinated their measures without major disruptions until the official end of the pandemic in spring 2023.

What are the lessons of the territorial handling of the pandemic in Germany for the UK? Decentralisation enabled fast and tailored responses and contributed to relatively low infection and mortality rates during the first wave of the pandemic. Nevertheless, decentralisation can also produce negative effects, when the policies of governments are either duplicated or contradict each other. Coordination therefore can help to avoid to competition, conflict, blame-shifting, inconsistency and confused citizens. Even though the priorities of the federal government and the Länder are not always aligned, in times of crisis regular consultations can keep deviations at a fairly minor level.

These insights also translate to other policy areas. For England, the decentralisation of decision-making and financial powers would be a necessary to deal with fundamental policy and political challenges. Providing constitutional guarantees for self-government would make English local authorities less dependent on the party-political considerations and allow for long-term planning and capacity building. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland already enjoy high levels of self-rule. The overall question for the UK's future is therefore about improving the cooperation between governments and finding ways to build long-term trust and engagement regardless of which parties are in power. There are obvious constraints on establishing a system of cooperative intergovernmentalism in the UK, including the majoritarian culture of power concentration in London and in Westminster manifested in the supremacy of parliament. Tying the devolved governments closer to the centre may also be at odds with the secessionist ambitions in Scotland and nationalism in Northern Ireland.

The 2022 reforms of intergovernmental relations aimed at a more meaningful engagement between governments. Yet the Prime Minister and Heads of Devolved Governments Council and the interministerial committees and groups seem to suffer the same flaws as the old joint ministerial committee: a lack of genuine interest and recognition of a common purpose. The Scottish and Welsh governments further criticised the UK government's unilateral decision-making, interventions in devolved areas.

There should be plenty of incentives for working together. At official level, the different governments maintain close relations without which the UK's political system would have hardly been able to cope effectively with major country-wide challenges. Since the UK's withdrawal from the EU and the experience of a severe pandemic, it may seem a desirable endeavour to empower devolved governments not only in terms of self-rule but by sharing power and responsibility. Comparing the handling of the pandemic in Germany and the UK shows that common ideational frameworks that promote a sense of country-wide community, loyalty and solidarity make a difference. This cannot be created overnight, but requires the support of key political figures, favourable constellations and future governments prepared to share power and responsibility.

Following Labour's win in the 2024 general election, intra-party links to the Welsh government and metro mayors in cities like London, Greater Manchester or Liverpool should naturally improve communication between the central and some devolved executives. However, in order to promote mutual interests and shared governance regardless of ad hoc party-political constellations, it will require a systematic approach to include representatives from all devolved authorities in policy discussions from early on,and provide them with reassurances that their input has impact.

While the three tiers have continued to meet, the new Labour government established the Council of the Nations and Regions to "focus on shared missions, delivery of public services, and shared values." Yet, despite consecutive attempts to establish a more systematic arrangement, intergovernmental exchanges continue to be dominated by informal, ad hoc contacts between ministers and officials behind the scenes. If the government is looking for ways how to improve the intergovernmental cooperation, it would not have to look far. It can build on proposals set out in the 2021 paper Reforming our Union by the Welsh government and the 2024 Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales. While Labour's manifesto pledged to turn the House of Lords into a democratic Assembly of the Nations and Regions seems to have disappeared since their election, the UK government should lead by example and take the commitment to take decisions by consensus seriously to make the Union work for all its constituent nations.

3. ITALY: UNSETTLED REGIONALISM

Arianna Giovannini / Antonella Seddone / Davide Vampa

Getting centre-local relationships right is essential to making devolution work. In this essay, we discuss the case of Italy, assessing the foundations of its 'unsettled system of regionalism', examining the impact of the pandemic, and reflecting on how the situation could develop going forward. We conclude by drawing lessons for the UK, especially concerning the challenges related to devolution systems that are fragmented and competitive.

The roots of Italian regionalism

The Italian regional system developed after the second world war in response to growing cultural and socioeconomic territorial disparities between the regions. The new constitution set out a framework for an asymmetric system containing both 'ordinary' and 'special' status regions. This initially established five special status regions, which were granted significant decision making and fiscal authority powers. The remaining fifteen ordinary status regions were created in the 1970s; however, they held limited authority until additional powers were transferred in the 1990s.

In 2001, the reforms implemented in the 1990s culminated in constitutional reform, which helped even out formal differences in the allocation of powers between ordinary and special status regions, providing a degree of uniformity. However, they failed to introduce clear mechanisms for co-decision and coordination with central government, and consequently fell short of addressing territorial inequalities. In practice, this was due to significant variations in the regions' administrative and financial capacities, which translated into an inconsistent use of their powers.[11] Furthermore, the rollback of the state's role in regional affairs weakened its ability to implement equalisation frameworks, ultimately contributing to increased

policy fragmentation and regional inequalities, particularly between northern and southern regions.[12]

The 2001 reforms also introduced a constitutional mechanism that allowed ordinary status regions to request 'additional forms of autonomy' from the state – giving, in practice, constitutional legitimacy to the development of a system of 'differentiated regionalism'. However, despite these changes, instability within the Italian political system increasingly fragmented various levels of governance. This dynamic became evident in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, where government sought to recentralise powers, coming into direct conflict with the wealthier northern regions of Lombardy, Veneto and Emilia-Romagna, which sought to make use of the provisions of the 2001 constitutional reform to gain further fiscal autonomy.[13]

As a result, by 2019 the Italian regional system was characterised by divergence and inequality. Recently, the central government has sought to address these issues by introducing a Bill that aims to regulate (and put some order into) the process of 'differentiated autonomy' – though concerns remain about whether Italian regionalism will become more fragmented, and less coherent, as a result.[14]

The pandemic effect

The shock of the pandemic put significant pressures on an already strained and divergent regional system. In the absence of a coherent national framework to regulate competencies, responsibilities and standards across different tiers, Covid-19 laid bare the conflicting efforts of central and regional governments, making it hard for them to find effective ways to coordinate their responses to the crisis.

Regional policy disparities, particularly in crucial sectors such as healthcare and social assistance, presented significant obstacles to the effective and consistent implementation of containment measures at the onset of the pandemic.

As in many other countries, the initial response to Covid-19 encouraged efforts towards centralisation and coordination. However, legacies of competitive and fragmented territorial politics quickly resurfaced and were even magnified – a finding relevant to other decentralised systems, including the UK's. Centralisation and coordination did not prove to be sustainable and eventually gave way to conflicts and tensions between the centre and the regions, underlining the unresolved tension between different tiers of government in Italy.

After the outbreak of Covid-19, the immediate responses implemented by the central government sought to address the uneven territorial spread of

the virus. Yet, eventually, the imposition of top-down, centralised decision-making emerged as the most practical and feasible option. However, there was a lack of real consultation with the regions, which led to controversies about the local implementation of national, top-down measures.[15] Moreover, after the first wave, tensions between the central government and regions re-emerged – reminiscent of conflicts between Westminster, devolved administrations and metro mayors in the UK.

The intensity of these arguments between national and regional governments affected how the central government handled the second wave. As infections started to peak in the autumn of 2020, with a much larger territorial span, the government resorted to a territorially differentiated strategy. Centrally-assigned, progressively restrictive 'tiers' were imposed on a regional basis, according to real-time epidemiological risk assessments. Yet, this approach ended up emphasising a regionally differentiated image of the pandemic which did not play to the centre's advantage, but rather strengthened the role of regional governors. Thus, while national responses to the Covid-19 crisis sought to steer actions toward a centralised approach during the period between the onset of the pandemic and the start of the vaccine's rollout, tensions with regions never subsided and, in some respects, were even exacerbated.

The fragmentation of Italian multilevel governance conditioned regions' responses to the coronavirus emergency, leading to mixed policy outputs and outcomes. First, many regions did not follow the central government's cautious approach to screening. Second, pre-existing disparities within the healthcare system played out at the regional level, as some regions had, for instance, far more testing capacity than others. The cases of Lombardy and Veneto, the two areas that were hit faster and harder by the pandemic, are emblematic of these divergences.[16] Veneto's territorially rooted system of welfare led to an efficient and effective mass-testing approach. Meanwhile, Lombardy's market-oriented and hospital-centred healthcare model worked against a fast rollout of tests.

Looking at the overall impact of the pandemic on the country, it is interesting to note that at the peak of the Covid-19 crisis there was a weak correlation between the severity of the health emergency and economic performances across regions.[17] As such, it is not possible to clearly identify a successful 'regional model' in the management of the pandemic.

There were, however, some important political consequences. The pandemic provided a window of opportunity for some of regional leaders to gain increased visibility on the political scene, just as Andy Burnham became more prominent in the UK. Even before the coronavirus crisis, Italian territorial politics had become more 'presidentialised'.[18] Covid-19 further accelerated the shift of authority to the political leaders dominating regional

executives. Covid-19 and pandemic responses emerged as political constructs leveraged by ambitious politicians. This observation resonates beyond Italy. For example, in the UK, despite the severity of the pandemic nationwide, leaders in devolved administrations such as Scotland and Wales, as well as in English combined authorities like Greater Manchester, adeptly employed communication strategies that projected an image of institutional efficiency and competence, all while fostering and promoting a genuine sense of advocacy for the communities they served.

The pandemic also affected the relationship between citizens and subnational institutions. The perceived capacity of regional governments to effectively handle the Covid-19 crisis, combined with the 'personal' communicative efforts of regional presidents, played a pivotal role in generating support for regional institutions, while also strengthening the popular appeal of regional autonomy in a time of crisis.[19] However, these dynamics did not emerge across the whole country, but only in certain regions – ie those with better standards of institutional performance (especially in terms of healthcare) and more 'active' presidents like Veneto which, as it happens, are also the ones with stronger aspirations for further autonomy.

The perceived effectiveness of pandemic management, as well as the dissonance between the regional and national levels in these processes as experienced by citizens, have parallels in the UK. For example, while English devolution has never received as much attention as its counterparts in Scotland and Wales, the coronavirus crisis served to expose a growing gulf between the central government and English regions in the provision of responses able to fit local needs. Public opinion grasped this, and polls started to show that issues such as regional inequalities and local autonomy gained new prominence in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Unsettled regionalism: lessons for the UK

Covid-19 served as a critical juncture that put Italian multilevel governance to the test. However, rather than setting the country on a new path marked by a more coherent regional settlement, the pandemic further exacerbated regional divergence on political and policy outcomes. In a regional system that had long lacked a cohesive national roadmap and was characterised by competitive dynamics, the central government's efforts to impose its authority from the top-down were ineffective, and were met by divergent centrifugal pressures especially from those regions that managed to 'exploit' the pandemic to advance further autonomy claims.

Several lessons can be drawn from the Italian case for the UK. The first concerns the structures underpinning multilevel governance relations. Unlike Italy, the UK has an uncodified constitution, which is often presented

as an obstacle to a stable territorial settlement that can address both the socioeconomic and democratic disparities at subnational level. Our analysis suggests that while having a written constitution can provide additional protection for regional autonomy, what ultimately matters is how devolution is designed and implemented. Any process of constitutional reform needs to be sustainable and coherent, supported by a clear framework for the allocation of power and competences. Central governments play a key role, as they are responsible for setting out the structural and systemic conditions that will determine how devolution systems operate.20 While different in their devolved settings, the Italian and UK cases have both experienced a lack of clear vision on this matter: bluntly, having a written constitution is no guarantee of an effective balance of power between central and regional and local government.

Second, and relatedly, the Italian experience shows that, to be effective, asymmetric devolution needs to be accompanied by robust equalisation mechanisms, so as to prevent dangerous dynamics of regional competition and divergence. In the absence of this, different regions can take diverse paths, leading to considerable variations in institutional, policy and economic outcomes. This offers an important warning for the UK, especially concerning devolution strategies in England. While often presented as a means to address regional economic divides, the ad hoc nature of devolution deals in England could end up further exacerbating territorial differences if it remains prey to short-term and uncoordinated efforts.

Third, to make devolution work, relations between the centre and the subnational level need to be based on cooperation and trust rather than hierarchical and competitive dynamics. Imposing reforms on regions from the centre, or seeking to thwart the voice of regions on reforms and processes that directly affect them, undermines the potential of devolution, and can foster political decoupling between different levels.

Finally, the Italian case underscores the profound political implications regional divergence dynamics can have on national solidarity when left unaddressed. This is evident in the emergence of centrifugal pressures, notably from regions with distinctive identities and economic traits. These pressures further strain centre-local relations and national cohesion. The increasing divergence of Scotland and Wales from England, coupled with escalating devolution demands from leaders in England, highlights significant challenges to the cohesion of the UK as a whole. This situation has been exacerbated by rapid changes in leadership and ministerial positions in Westminster since 2022, presenting a scenario of central government instability that mirrors some of the dynamics commonly associated with Italian politics. The change of government following the 2024 general election provides a great opportunity for the Labour administration to take the design and implementation of devolution

seriously – keeping in mind that, as the case of Italy shows, asymmetric approaches without a coherent framework can be risky.

4. SWEDEN: WORLDS APART?

Niklas Peters

More than five years since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, memories of the nuances of crisis management across Europe have already faded. However, they are worth revisiting. The Swedish approach, in particular, remains remarkable, because it diverged so fundamentally from the pandemic management of all other European states. While most countries relied on strict lockdowns, Sweden largely pursued a strategy based on non-binding recommendations and individual responsibility. This divergence was no coincidence, but rather an expression of fundamental differences in the constitutional and institutional frameworks for crisis management – differences that will be relevant for managing future health crises, and from which we can learn.

Why Sweden took a different path

It was Sweden's unique constitutional framework that fundamentally shaped its response to the pandemic, distinguishing the country's Covid-19 response from that of most European states, including the UK and other Nordic countries. Swedish law prohibits the restriction of fundamental rights through emergency legislation, resulting in a decentralized approach to crisis management that grants considerable autonomy to local and regional authorities, with a central role for the Public Health Agency (Folkhälsomyndigheten). This constitutional framework led almost inevitably to a strategy that relied on voluntary measures and personal responsibility with minimal state intervention, which has since become known as "Swedish exceptionalism."[21]

This approach was based on three core elements of Swedish crisis management that were introduced in 2001: maintaining everyday functions, relying on established structures, and maintaining a local focus in crisis response.[22] During the pandemic, these principles led to a clear division of labor among central institutions: the Public Health Agency assumed a

coordinating role and provided expertise in the form of professional recommendations, while the National Board of Health and Welfare and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency were active in a supporting capacity. A central feature of Swedish pandemic management was that operational implementation remained with regional and local authorities, with the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) serving as an important intermediary between the local and central levels, particularly overseeing the coordination of vaccine distribution.[23] This special position of SALAR in promoting intergovernmental coordination is another distinctive feature of the Swedish model that was absent in many other countries.

This decentralized and technocratic approach to Swedish crisis management persisted throughout the first year of the pandemic. Only with the Covid-19 Act – which was passed by parliament in January 2021, and provided the legal basis for general restrictions such as banning large-scale events or closing public facilities – did this approach shift toward more centralized measures.[24] While these changes marked a departure from purely decentralized pandemic management with the introduction of some central elements, the approach remained within constitutional boundaries.

Sweden and the UK: Two models of crisis governance

But was Sweden's approach truly unique, or merely the most visible manifestation of a more liberal pandemic management? A comparison with the UK helps to contextualize the characteristics in an international context. Initially, both countries pursued herd immunity strategies, with the UK abandoning this approach relatively quickly after public pressure, culminating in the Coronavirus Act 2020, while Sweden maintained it throughout 2020 and introduced moderate restrictions in January 2021.[25] It is also noteworthy that no formal state of emergency was declared in either country: in Sweden, because the constitution prohibited it, and in the UK, because the government deliberately avoided it.[26]

Both countries had similarly integrated 'new public management' (NPM) reform agendas into many public sector areas over the previous decades, privatizing and outsourcing public services, which lead to challenges in the management of the pandemic. This was evident in the UK's organization of the National Health Service, particularly in the outsourcing of testing and contact tracing, which had "minimal impact" on reducing infections.[27] In Sweden, similar challenges were seen in elderly care, where high mortality rates in care homes were partly symbolic of the pandemic management and related to shortages in the care sector due to austerity measures from economic crises in the 1980s/90s, which brought the NPM paradigm to the

forefront.[28] However, the fundamental difference between both countries during the pandemic lies in the strategic approach to crisis management. Sweden's response was characterized by the technocratic and decentralized management of the Public Health Agency and local actors. The state epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, dominated public discourse, explained protective measures, and shaped public communication, often overshadowing political leadership. Scientific expertise, not political calculation, shaped the debate in Sweden. In contrast, in the UK under Boris Johnson, the debate was highly politicized, with politicians often more visible than experts: a stark contrast to Sweden's technocratic approach. This contrast—between Sweden's technocratic and Britain's politicized model—may represent the most consequential distinction between the pandemic responses of both countries.

Municipalities at the frontline

The divergence of approaches becomes most tangible when examining the local level more closely and the role of subnational actors in pandemic management in both countries. Sweden's 290 municipalities and 21 regions possess considerable operational and financial autonomy, particularly in healthcare and social services, precisely those areas that were most critical during the Covid-19 pandemic. The local and regional administrative levels also hold a central position in the Swedish welfare state: they provide public services such as healthcare, elderly care, education, and infrastructure. This decentralized structure, rooted in the Swedish traditions of local autonomy and self-governance, allows municipal and regional entities to maintain considerable independence by levying their own taxes. Therefore, the local level was not only active in an executive role, but was an integral part of crisis management, from risk prevention to post-crisis normalization. This central position went so far that even local crisis management committees were involved in coordination and possessed genuine decision-making authority.[29] This central position of the local and regional level in crisis management and the associated autonomy also came with coordination difficulties. The complex vertical and horizontal cooperation and coordination among various national, regional, and local actors proved to be challenging. The pandemic revealed a partial dependence of these institutions on central guidelines and recommendations, challenging and intensifying intergovernmental cooperation.[30] In an interview with the author, one expert from the Swedish local governments stated:

"One of the problems between central, regional, and local is that there are a number of different authorities at central level. There is not just the health authority. [...] At the regional level, there are county councils that also play a role in having an opinion and actually dealing with difficult situations. [...]

So you could say that one of the complicated things was actually figuring out who should do what."

While the decentralized approach in Sweden enabled locally adapted responses in pandemic management, it simultaneously also revealed intergovernmental tensions and difficulties in coordinating measures.

In sharp contrast, British pandemic management concentrated on the national level, with a strategy often summarized as "muddling through",[31] and with local authorities functioning primarily as a conduit for central recommendations rather than as independent decision-makers. Due to austerity policies and the associated drastic reduction in local funding in recent years, local governments in the UK – and especially in England – were not in a position to undertake elementary tasks in crisis management anyway.[32] Centralisation enabled greater uniformity of measures, but also reduced the flexibility to adapt to local conditions. Where Sweden encountered complexity and problems in coordination between different administrative levels, the UK confronted the limits of hierarchical control in a geographically and epidemiologically diverse nation.

What can we learn from this?

As early as June 2020, an independent inquiry commission analyzed the state measures for managing the Covid-19 pandemic in Sweden. The report of the commission pointed towards significant deficiencies in Swedish pandemic management, including delayed responsiveness at the national level, inadequate preparation, and inadequate legal frameworks for infection protection. The commission also criticized the fragmented distribution of responsibilities in crisis management, leading to coordination problems between different government levels. The need to establish effective coordination mechanisms between regions and municipalities, while maintaining or adapting their local autonomy, was highlighted. It was also recommended to strengthen the role of the Public Health Agency in pandemic situations to enable centralized coordination of containment measures and thus ensure more efficient combat against waves of infection.[33]

The Swedish example offers valuable lessons, especially regarding decentralization and intergovernmental coordination. While Sweden has a decentralized system in crisis management with significant competencies and financial resources at the local level, the experience shows that these factors alone are not sufficient to ensure effective pandemic management. The challenges in vertical and horizontal coordination underline that the efficiency of crisis management significantly depends on intergovernmental coordination mechanisms. The difficulties and complexities Sweden experienced underscore the importance of a strong link between the relevant actors, such as the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. A

similar strengthening of the position of the Local Government Association in the UK could potentially contribute to improving the coordination and effectiveness of collaboration between the local level and central government. Furthermore, the Swedish experience shows that strengthening local actors to enforce pandemic measures is crucial. The local level must be recognized and involved as a serious decision-making body in crisis management to effectively respond to local specifics. While Sweden could have benefited from some aspects of the British approach, particularly regarding centralized coordination in certain areas, it is evident that the UK could also learn from greater decentralization. A balanced mix of both approaches could improve the flexibility and adaptability of crisis management in both countries. Another important but mostly overlooked aspect is the issue of privatizing public services, which led to an increased mortality rate in Swedish nursing homes. This underscores that austerity policies in municipalities, especially in times of crisis, can be counterproductive. Ensuring adequate funding and public ownership of critical services is crucial for resilience against crises.

Future health crises as well as polycrisis events are inevitable. The experiences from Sweden during the Covid-19 pandemic – with its insights into the trade-offs between decentralization and coordination, the risks of austerity, and the limits of local autonomy – offer insights for researchers as well as decision-makers in and outside the UK that point to the development of more resilient crisis management structures.
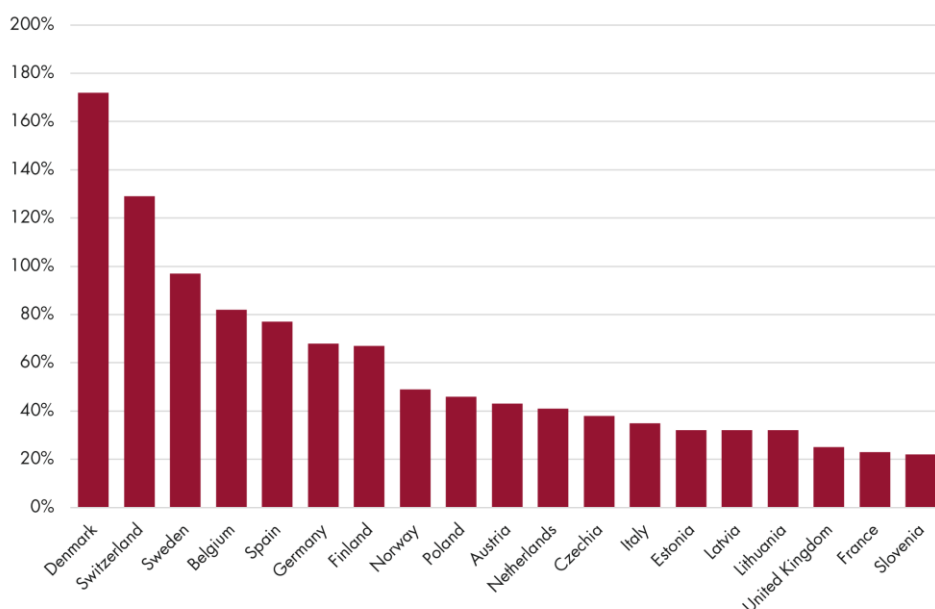
5. FRANCE: CENTRALISM'S LAST STAND

Raul Magni-Berton

France is a centralized country. A simple look at the index of fiscal decentralization provided by the OECD in 2022 is enough to describe France as the second most centralized country in Europe, just behind Slovenia and just ahead of the United Kingdom. However, over the last forty years, the reforms aimed at decentralizing the country have been numerous. Each president has tried to reduce centralization with different strategies, without significant success.

FIGURE 1: FRANCE IS THE SECOND MOST CENTRALISED COUNTRY IN EUROPE

Fiscal centralisation by country

Source: OECD Fiscal Decentralisation Database 2022

Advocates of centralization regularly cite two arguments to limit decentralization: first, that a strong and centralized government reduces territorial inequalities and second, that it is better at dealing with

emergencies. These two arguments have recently been challenged by two major crises.

The first one occurred in 2019, when the gilets jaunes movement mobilized a historically high number of people, especially in rural areas. The strong inequalities between the capital (Paris) and poor regions were highlighted in the debate. For example, according to the Ministry of Culture, in 2019, 62 per cent of public budgets for cultural activities were used in the region of Paris. The remaining 38 per cent was shared by all 12 metropolitan regions and five overseas territories. These budgetary choices are a far cry from the idea of a state ensuring equality between regions.

The second crisis, which will be discussed in more detail here, was the covid-19 pandemic, in which the idea that centralization would be synonymous with effectiveness in an emergency ran up against the facts. These two crises increase support for decentralization and its importance.

The territorial organization of France

Today, France has 18 regions, 94 departments, 992 intercommunal councils and about 36,000 communes. All these administrative divisions are called "territorial collectivities". Their number and powers have regularly changed. Four major territorial reforms (1982, 2003, 2014 and 2022) modified the competences, the number and the definition of each territorial collectivity.

In 2023, the Cour des Comptes ("Court of Auditors"), the supreme audit institution, issued a critical report on these reforms, especially since 2009, when its last report was published. The Cour des Comptes pointed out that "the autonomy of local councils to decide on the evolution of their revenues has been reduced" by the reforms. In short, the decentralization process in France has increased local responsibilities but reduced local autonomy. This has led to a record resignation of 1,021 mayors between 2014 and 2018.

The impact of the pandemic on the debates on decentralization

In March 2020, as the pandemic developed in France, opinions were divided. For example, two thinktanks published a report at the time on the question of decentralization. The report by Generation Libre claimed that "federal countries are not more vulnerable to crises than others", while the report by the Institut Rousseau argued that "in times of crisis, the much-criticized centralization of the state appears for what it is: a guarantee of administrative efficiency, coherence and speed".

However, this debate was quickly influenced by the success of the containment policy in the Federal Republic of Germany (in terms of deaths, hospital congestion and infection) compared to France. At the end of March, the newspaper l'Express, like many others, documented the fact that many French patients were welcomed in German and Swiss hospitals because the French hospitals were overwhelmed.

The comparison with Germany, which managed the crisis in a somewhat decentralized way, became more and more salient. On April 20, the right-wing newspaper Le Figaro published an article entitled "Has the centralization of the state slowed down the handling of the crisis?" and on May 2, the left-wing newspaper Libération published "The fiasco surrounding the management of Covid-19 in France is paradoxically the bearer of good news: the failure of centralization".

Although the French centralized approach was quickly considered a failure, the government took two major decisions that further centralized the management of the pandemic. On May 11, a decree established that the prefect (who reports directly to the executive) had the right to interfere with the powers of local authorities. Twenty days later, on May 31, another decree extended the prefect's power over local authorities "in proportion to the risk of contamination".

This executive aggrandizement provoked institutional reactions. In particular, on May 30, 19 presidents of French regions and other territorial collectives jointly signed an op-ed in the pro-government newspaper Le Monde entitled "For recovery and reconstruction, the regions are ready!", in which they asked for more autonomy and affirmed that the regions "have demonstrated their agility in the face of a state entangled in its centralism and bureaucracy". The senate, which in France is made up of officials elected by local authorities, was also massively contesting the centralization of power, in general and in particular during the pandemic, and on July 2 presented a report with 50 proposals to "truly" decentralize France.

This reaction affected the government. The prime minister, Edouard Philippe, who had defended a centralized management of the pandemic, was dismissed on 3 July and replaced by Jean Castex, who declared that he would fight the pandemic "as closely as possible with our fellow citizens and in accordance with the situation in each region". On 11 July, the two abovementioned decrees were repealed and there was no further interference in the balance of territorial powers. The policies of containment also changed: While 40 per cent of containment measures were implemented at the national level before 3 July, only 27 per cent were implemented at the national level after that date. Like many other countries, France decentralized the fight against the pandemic during the second and third waves.

The future of decentralization in France

Decentralization is extremely popular in France, both among local officials and citizens. Many parliamentarians also support it. Centralists' hope that it the pandemic would weaken the case for decentralization were dashed. However, after so many reforms failed to decentralize France, a certain scepticism about France's ability to reform has set in.

These repeated failures are probably due to the fact that local authorities were not properly considered in the design of reforms. Of course, they were consulted and could comment, but they have never had the right to initiate or block reforms. And yet the success of these reforms depends on their participation in the legislative process. Without it, what could be more normal than to end up with a reform in which Paris, like a manager who doesn't know how to delegate, transfers the operational work to the local authorities while keeping real power to itself?

Local authorities, even when represented at the national level by the senate, find it difficult to compete with the hegemony of the executive. In France, power rests at the top.

Despite these obstacles, however, it is not impossible for local authorities to play an important role in future reforms and the distribution of powers. The 2003 constitutional reform enshrined the principles of experimentation and subsidiarity, enabling local authorities to play an essential role in the development of public policies. Experimentation allows local authorities to deviate from the legal framework governing their powers for a certain period of time. However, the extreme complexity of this procedure has resulted in only a handful of practical cases in the last 20 years.

Subsidiarity is the principle that decisions should be taken at the most efficient territorial level. However, according to the French Constitutional Council, this principle is currently too abstract to have any influence on constitutional review, as it does not say who determines the most efficient level for the conduct of public policy. In the absence of precise details, it is the French parliament that defines the most effective level and thus determines the transfer of powers. In other words, these two principles are promising, but as they stand, they have no practical impact on the level of territorial autonomy.

In the words of the current president of the Republic, subsidiarity should guide future reforms: "Look at where decisions are made most efficiently. That's what decentralization is all about". But today, the question is: who measures the effectiveness of decisions? Until now, subsidiarity has been top-down, because only the central state could assess the effectiveness of policies. This has created an imbalance in the application of this principle,

because the central state sees itself as much more effective than the other territorial levels of government. To produce decentralization, we need to reverse this trend and propose "bottom-up subsidiarity", based on an assumption that local authorities themselves who must decide on the most effective territorial level for the implementation of a public policy. The default expectation should be "local before central", not the other way around.

In the next step of decentralization, President Emmanuel Macron recently said that "refoundation will start from below". At this stage, it's too early to know what "from below" means. What it should mean, however, is that local authorities should decide what subsidiarity means in practice without being subject to the tutelage of Paris.

6. ENGLAND: THE MARCH OF DEVOLUTION

Paul Anderson

2024 marked 10 years since the signing of the first devolution deal between the UK government and the Greater Manchester combined authority. Building on the agreement to transfer powers from Whitehall to the combined authority and the creation of the first city-region mayor outside of London, George Osborne, then chancellor of the exchequer, heralded a 'devolution revolution'.[34]

Almost one decade later, while talk of a revolution may have subsided, huge progress has been made. To date, 13 mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) are in operation across England, two of which elected their first mayor in May 2025 (Greater Lincolnshire, and Hull and East Yorkshire). A decade after the first devolution agreement, over 60 per cent of England's population is now covered by devolution deals.[35]

The first metro-mayoral elections took place in 2017. They returned overwhelming victories for the Conservative party, which won 4 of the 6 mayoralties, while Labour gained 2.[36] Turnout averaged around 28 per cent. By 2021, the mayoral political landscape had significantly changed. In 2018 and 2019, Labour mayors were elected in the newly established North of Tyne and South Yorkshire combined authorities, and in the 2021 elections, Labour won 5 of the 7 metro-mayoral contests. Turnout at the 2021 election averaged just over 33 per cent, a modest but noteworthy increase on the 2017 elections.[37] Elections in 2024 saw the Conservatives reduced to just one mayor (Ben Houchen in Tees Valley). Labour mayors were re-elected in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire, while the party gained the West Midlands from the Conservatives (by a slim margin of just over 1,500 votes) and won the mayoral contests in the three new MCAs. In the latest elections in May 2025, Labour maintained control of West of England, but lost Cambridge and Peterborough to the Conservatives. Reform UK won both mayoral contests

in the inaugural elections for the Greater Lincolnshire and Hull and East Yorkshire combined authorities. Turnout across elections in 2024 and 2025 averaged 30 per cent. Mayors have become an important part of the English political landscape, but low turnout underlines the importance for both mayors and political parties to raise the profile of subnational governance in England and encourage greater citizen engagement.

Visible leadership and getting things done

The UK is not unique in its constitutional makeup as a multi-level state. While not a federation with a codified constitution detailing a division of sovereignty – as the other countries in this publication are – the UK has multiple centres of power, ranging from the UK parliament in Westminster and the devolved governments and legislatures in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to the MCAs in England. With powers over important policy areas such as housing, economic development, planning, transport and skills, mayors across the MCAs have certainly made their mark. Examples include the Liverpool City Region's £30m 'LCR Connect' scheme to provide ultrafast full-fibre broadband across the region and the Bee Network in Greater Manchester, which reestablished public control of buses and provides a London-style integrated public transport system across the region.

As well as exercising powers within their purview, mayors have also sought to use their soft powers to bring about change. This is notable in areas such as homelessness, an issue on which mayors have limited authority. Nonetheless, from Greater Manchester to the West Midlands, mayors have used their convening powers to bring together various organisations, stakeholders and resources to tackle rough-sleeping and homelessness. Across various policy areas, mayors provide visible leadership, giving a voice to local/regional issues on the national stage. Importantly, this is not a fact missed by voters. In a recent survey, an average of 74 per cent of people could name their mayor, while only 43 per cent could identify their MP and far fewer (20 per cent) could name their local authority leader.[38]

Arguably, the Covid pandemic increased the visibility of mayors, both regionally and nationally. During the pandemic, the UK government pursued a largely top-down approach which sidelined the concerns, knowledge and expertise of local and regional authorities and exposed a rather dysfunctional relationship between the UK government and MCAs. In October 2020, this was laid bare in a showdown between the UK government and Greater Manchester mayor, Andy Burnham, over what the mayor perceived to be insufficient financial support for businesses forced to close due to a regional lockdown. Dominating news headlines, the mayor was vociferous in his critique of the centralising, London-centric strategy of

the UK government and called for more input from subnational authorities in decision-making processes.[39] Giving evidence to the Covid Inquiry in November 2023, the consensus from the mayors of Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and London was that centralised decision-making hindered a more effective response to combatting the spread of the virus.[40]

As figureheads for their city-regions, the public profiles of mayors increased throughout the pandemic and beyond. Despite the top-down approach of the government, mayors were instrumental in mustering local responses including coordinating with local authorities and other public bodies, convening stakeholder meetings and signposting businesses to government support. Collectively, the mayors worked together to share knowledge, lobby and influence the government's Covid strategy. They have continued to do so post-pandemic, most notably on issues such as transport. While this proved less successful when it came to the continuation of HS2, mayors played a leading role in challenging the government's plans to close hundreds of rail ticket offices in England, resulting in the policy being scrapped in October 2023.[41] The increased visibility of mayors illuminates not only the value of a leading figure standing up for their region but the wider significance of city-region devolution. Polls conducted prior to the 2021 and 2024 mayoral elections underlined increasing support for further devolution and a growing consensus that more powers in areas such as housing and transport should be held at the local/regional level.[42] With clear public appetite for greater devolution, the question remains: where next for subnational governance in England?

Towards deeper devolution

In the context of the 2024 general election, a noteworthy trend in the debate on English devolution was the cross-party recognition of the value and potential of MCAs and metro mayors, with both Labour and Conservative parties committed to widening and deepening devolution across England. Having been announced in the 2022 levelling up white paper, in 2023, the Greater Manchester and West Midlands combined authorities negotiated new 'trailblazer deals'. These secured the transfer of further powers to both city-regions and, perhaps most importantly, a move towards a single financial settlement, providing some much-needed financial flexibility for the MCAs.

The recommendations of the Labour party's 2022 Report of the Commission on the UK's Future, led by Gordon Brown, painted the image of a new era of devolution across the UK, with specific attention paid to English governance — including more powers for metro mayors, a call for financial flexibility and the establishment of 'a Council of England' to formalise relations between the UK government. [43] In his 2023 speech to the Labour party

conference, Keir Starmer reconfirmed the pledge for further devolution, proclaiming 'if we want to challenge the hoarding of potential in our economy'.[44] Following its victory in the 2024 general election, Labour has advanced the devolution agenda, culminating in the publication of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment bill in July 2025. As the debate on English devolution enters a new phase, there are two key areas that require further consideration.

The first area is fiscal devolution. The single settlement agreed in the recent trailblazer deals is a welcome step towards more meaningful devolution, moving away from the 'beauty pageant' and 'begging bowl' funding culture that has characterised English devolution hitherto. The MCAs already have significant responsibilities, but require more funding and flexibility in order to exercise powers fully. Unlike Whitehall and its siloed approach to policy, MCAs are able to take a more holistic approach to tackling issues, putting in place a joined-up approach to governance, tailored to the particularities of the local area.[45] The Brown Commission championed fiscal devolution but much detail was missing.[46] In her 2024 Mais lecture, the then-shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, said very little about devolution, but acknowledged the important role played by local and regional leaders in driving economic growth.[47] In this context, Labour would do well to further embrace fiscal devolution as a guiding thread for government policy. Unfortunately, the white paper did not include commitments to significant fiscal devolution, though mayors continue to press their case. Without such a commitment, there is a risk of a Treasury-driven centralising mindset dominating future debate.

The second area relates to governance from the centre. The commitment to further devolution and strengthen MCA-government relations must amount to more than lip service. As well as necessitating a greater transfer of powers away from Whitehall, it requires central government to keep in check its centralising tendencies. Relations between the MCAs and UK government should be predicated upon the principles of mutual trust and respect, undergirded by a sense of partnership. This would embed mayors in UK government policy processes, creating intergovernmental machinery to facilitate more effective relations. Since coming to power, Labour has made significant advances in this area, including the establishment of the Council of the Nations and Regions and Mayoral Council for England. However, while mayors now have a formal seat at the table, the ability of these new forums to strengthen partnership and facilitate working across governments remains to be seen. To make devolution work, reform at the centre is just as crucial as devolving more powers.

Since the election of the first mayors in 2017, the city-region mayoral model has become a prominent feature in the institutional architecture of the UK

state. With commitments by both main political parties to create more MCAs and deepen existing arrangements, English devolution is firmly back on the political agenda. In recent years, mayors have provided visible place-based leadership, delivering a raft of initiatives tailored to local circumstances and representing and promoting their city-regions on both national and international stages. Over the last decade, significant progress has been made to transform the landscape of subnational governance in England, but more remains to be done to strengthen existing institutions and develop a long-term strategy for devolution. The forward march of English devolution continues.

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