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The French territorial reform of the regions: objectives, risks and challenges for some forgotten territories

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Abstract:

Remapping and merging the Regions with one another, redefining the role of the departments, promoting the grouping of municipalities, creating metropolitan areas, reducing the local authorities' expenditure, improving citizen proximity and involving them in the decision-making process in a more effective way: these were the expectations of the NOTRe law, which has overhauled the territorial organisation of the French Republic. The purpose of this article is to review the reasons which led to this territorial reform, in order to highlight the discrepancies between the announced objectives and reality, and specifically to show the challenges the French regions will have to face in the future.

Keywords: decentralization, territorial reform, region, France, left behind

Introduction

On June 3, 2014, the President of the French Republic François Hollande announced the launch of a reform whose aim was to change the territorial architecture of the Republic. The objective was to change the organisation of the French local authorities radically, in a country which had, in 2015, no fewer than 36.658 municipalities, 101 departments, 13 metropolitan areas (including the Greater Paris one) and 22 regions.

Following the 1982 decentralization laws and the incorporation of the decentralized Republic into the Constitution in 2003, the President's ambition was to simplify and clarify the territorial organization of France with this reform, for everyone to know who is in charge, who finances it and from what resources. It thus proposed a constitutional revision involving a reform of the inter-municipal authorities, the disappearance of the departments and the reduction of the number of regions from 22 to 13, with new powers and appropriate financial resources. The idea was to simplify the institutional architecture of France, with a law focusing on the delimitation of the regions and the procedures related to regional and departmental elections, and another law on the new territorial organisation of the Republic.

This situation is not new in Europe (Christensen, 2003). As in other countries, France is witnessing a "rise of regional authority" (Hooghe et al., 2010) or a "rise of the meso" (Keating, 2013), which reflects an increasingly strong interest in local conditions for exercising governance. If we consider the ongoing territorial reform processes already underway in a lot of countries in Europe, we very quickly notice a common point between these approaches (Schedler, 2003 ; Peace, 2008 ; Vrangbæk, 2010; Wollmann, 2010; Hlepas, 2010; Baldersheim and Rose, 2010; De Peuter et al., 2011). Regions and cities are on the rise, while intermediate territorial levels such as departments seem to be under threat (Leonardi, 1992; Hooghe et al., 2008; Palermo and Wilson, 2014; Schakel et al., 2015; Van Langenhove, 2016). This is for example the case in Italy, where Matteo Renzi passed a bill reducing the powers of the provinces – the equivalent of the French departments – in order to abolish them permanently in the long term (Basile,

2019). Like other European countries, the French territorial reform seems to follow this dual trend which consists in deepening the role of the regional level (Loughlin, 2007) and large cities, but also of the metropolitan-regional couple. In addition, the transfer of skills towards the regions is systematized. For example, the Belgian government has transferred 17 billion euros to its three regions, which corresponds to the new skills it acquired in the health and employment fields (Wayenberg & Steen, 2018).

However, this federalization/regionalization is not free from difficulties. Baldini and Baldi (2014) thus consider Italy as a case of failed and uncompleted federalization due to political and cultural factors, but also and above all to the State's schizophrenia since it wants to remain very centralized but also keep its strong localism tradition at the same time. This duality can be noticed in France as well, with a centralism tradition that is now being decried (Wright, 2003) and which has partly justified regionalization. The debate on the territorial reform, discussed before the Parliament, has logically got conflictual and has quickly focused on two specific points: the regions' borders (and the choice of their capital) on the one hand, and the place of the territories located outside the metropole on the other hand. As in other countries, this regionalization raises lots of questions about the Afonso and Venâncio (2019) regional spending efficiency.

The French territorial reorganisation is taking place in a dual international and national context. On a global scale, on the one hand, we observe increasing pressures on the regions to become "economic competitive actors", with the associated neoliberal¹ idea of strengthening their economic competitiveness (Brennetot, 2018) by means of appropriate reforms and procedures. On the other hand, the reform appears in a context of economic crisis and institutional tension, which highlights the end of the financial wealth of local authorities. As a consequence, the traditional mechanism of "subsidies" becomes a rarer gesture and there is a need to rationalise the functioning of local

¹ We define neo-liberalism according to Houghlin et al. (2010), as a policy and an ideology inspired by the ideas of the "New right" of Hayek or Friedman, and opposed to the welfare state and Keynesian policies. It has inspired Reaganism, Thatcherism, and a part of the New Public Management policies.

authorities. These two evolutions imply the implementation of the new public management (Lane, 2002; Chandler, 2017), characterised by the need to rationalise the organisation of territorial structures and to clarify the distribution of competences. At the same time, on the French scale, the reform is taking place in a complex context in terms of territorial organisation (number of territorial layers, municipal fragmentation, unclear boundaries of the various levels of government). The distribution of competences is difficult to understand (they are increasing and intertwined with the different territorial levels), local authorities are financially dependent from State allocations, and the central State has introduced competition between the territories, leading them to apply for national calls for tender in order to obtain financing for their development.

As a result, this international and national context has led to a territorial reform which is characterised by the strengthening of the regions and the metropolises, a reduction by half of the number of regions, a more visible repartition of competences between territorial levels (via the withdrawal of the general jurisdiction clause), and the weakening of the communal (in favour of the inter-municipal level) and departmental (in favour of the inter-municipal and regional level) levels. Following other scholars and the usual way to designate these major mutations in the organisation of the French Republic, we refer to them as the "territorial big bang", even if the initial goals were only partly reached in the end (Torre et Bourdin, 2015).

In the rural areas, the local elected officials immediately rallied around this "territorial big bang". Joined by the local associations or mayors of very small municipalities, they highlighted the services provided by the departments in isolated places, far from metropolitan areas and with populations in difficulty. However, their usefulness in the suburban territories – now well-established in the French landscape – is also underlined, particularly in terms of social cohesion, which remains their dominant competence. In this context, and at a time when many questions are emerging regarding the place of peripheral territories with the Yellow Vests revolt (Bourdin et al., 2021), the objective of our article is to question the territorial reform and its consequences looking specifically at what consequences this reform has

had for the French regions. Their numbers have been drastically reduced, most have seen their size increase, and their competencies have undergone significant changes.

By retracing the initial objectives set out by the Government, we propose to assess the risks and challenges for the regions. Following the approach of Ogbazghi (2020), we used the framework of historical institutionalism to argue that the territorial reform has not achieved its main objectives. On the basis of this framework proposed by Hall & Taylor (1996), we have therefore analysed the recent evolution of institutions, conventions and funding of the French regions. Our study is based on an analysis of the legislative texts and of various parliamentary reports produced by politicians of the Senate and the National Assembly. We have also studied the reports of the Court of Auditors and the documents produced by other national bodies dealing with territorial reform.

Our article is structured as follows: first, we will present the European and French context of decentralization; then we will explain the challenges and outcomes of the territorial reform; finally, we will detail more specifically the consequences of this reform for the territories "that don't matter".

1. From centralism to regionalization

From an international perspective, local governments in Europe represent a very great diversity of structures, which is itself the result of historical developments and state traditions. France is no exception to the rule in terms of historical determinism, but it has its own institutional traditions, which largely undermined the sense and the pace of the possible reforms of the State and the way to decentralization or de-concentration.

1.1. The European context of decentralization

Following various authors (Loughlin et al., 2012, Swianiewicz, 2014) one can define three types of state in Europe: unitary states (France, Sweden, Ireland, Portugal and the Netherlands), federal states (Germany, Belgium, etc.) and hybrid states (United Kingdom, Spain and even Italy). One can also

distinguish four major state traditions influencing local organization: the Napoleonic tradition (France, Italy, Spain, Greece) based on centralization, uniformity and symmetry; the Germanic tradition (Germany, Austria, the Netherlands), which recognizes intermediate bodies working alongside a powerful state; the Anglo-Saxon tradition, which does not recognize the notion of the State as a legal person; and the Scandinavian tradition, which borrows the principle of uniformity from the French model but incorporates it within a more decentralized framework. As a model of the Napoleonic state, the French administration accepts very few differences in treatment between local and regional authorities, which have to operate according to a standardized model and have neither legal powers nor extensive resources.

This great diversity, although it makes the search for a possible single model of local government inoperative, does not exclude, on the contrary, the identification of common practices and the observation of similar developments towards more decentralization and local responsibilities. In this respect, five main observations can be made: regarding the levels of local government, a majority of European countries have a two-level model (Austria, Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom, Sweden, Switzerland, Romania) and a minority has a three-level model (Germany, Spain, Italy, Poland). In each of these countries, local and regional authorities have broad competences distributed according to the principle of subsidiarity and there is no supervision of one local and regional authority over another; inter-municipality is widespread even if, in most cases, these are flexible and non-institutionalized mechanisms; similarly, although cross-financing is frequent, it is left to the discretion of the authorities and is not regulated.

Most European countries have undertaken reforms of their local administrative map with the goal of reducing the number of municipalities and, in some cases, of promoting the regional level. However, faced with the lack of success of voluntary approaches, they generally had to either abandon their project in the face of hostility from the population or elected representatives, or resort to "authoritarian laws". In addition, a widely shared trend is the emergence of the metropolises, which is characterized, in federal countries, by the recognition of the capital as a federated state and, in unitary or 'mixed'

states, by the establishment of the status of the metropolitan city, which combines communal, inter-communal and departmental competences. Thus, the French territorial reform is part of a more general European movement of decentralization and territorial administrative simplification.

1.2. The ambiguity of the French territorial movement of decentralization

For many observers (like Hoffmann-Martinot, 2002), France is mostly distinguishable due to its deep Jacobin and centralist nature, with a very slow rate of decentralization compared to that of many bordering countries, as well as the very measured and limited adaptations of local government processes to people's demands in local or participatory democracy. Despite numerous attempts of decentralization or de-concentration, the situation has remained largely unchanged, and so has the number of intermediate levels, and the only major change was caused by the success of inter-communality measures in the first part of the 20th Century (Galès & Borraz, 2005).

The history of French decentralization can be interpreted as part of a broader effort from the French State to face the increasing complexity of its mission and to reform itself (Thoenig, 2005; Cole, 2006). From the 18th century onwards, tensions have increased between the absolutist power of the State and the local level, which advocated more freedom. With the French Revolution, 36.000 municipalities succeeded the pre-1789 parishes; they were conceived as the local level par excellence, that of citizen proximity (Schmidt, 2007). From now on, the country will be organised in a uniform way, with four administrative layers: the department, the district, the canton and the commune. Far from being decentralizing, this unification of territorial organization, desired by the Jacobins, makes France a "one and indivisible" Republic, centralized in Paris.

It was not until the early 2000s that new reforms of decentralization were implemented (Schmidt, 1990; Levy, 2001; Levy et al., 2005), with the goal of "keeping the Republic of the proximities alive" as the then right-wing Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin said. The law was published on August 13, 2004 and sealed the recognition of the Region by the Constitution. The sentence – France is an indivisible, secular,

democratic and social Republic – in Article 1 of the Constitution now adds: "and its organisation is decentralised".

This bill broadens and deepens the decentralization concept imagined twenty years earlier. The legislative package led by President Jacques Chirac constitutes "Act II of Decentralization". The decentralised organisation of the State is characterised by a significant transfer of competences to the various local authorities, such as economic development, transport infrastructure, tourism, social housing or education. The Region is conceived as an economic development actor while the social aspect is more falls to the department. This transfer comes with a redeployment of the State's staff to municipalities, departments and regions. Finally, local authorities have their own resources with financial autonomy and the possibility of setting and collecting local taxes.

In the 2000s, it was in a context of economic and financial crisis that President Nicolas Sarkozy decided to reform the territorial "millefeuille". The work of the "Committee for the Reform of Local Government" resulted in several recommendations in 2008-2009: (i) rationalise the inter-municipal map, (ii) remove the general jurisdiction clause ², (iii) improve the democratic process in local authorities, (iv) allow the merger of municipalities for those who so wish, (v) reduce the number of regions to fifteen, (vi) create eleven metropolises. In 2010, it was decided to add another layer to the territorial "millefeuille": the metropolis.

The election of President François Hollande sped the process up, as he pushed to implement a real "Act III of decentralization" during his mandate. The general jurisdiction clause was dropped in order to clarify the allocation of functions at each level and to limit the accumulation of overlaps between jurisdictions (Table 1). In addition, this "Act III" planned the reduction of the number of regions. On 25 November 2014, the National Assembly passed the law which reduced the number of regions from 22 to 13. On January 1, 2015, the law on the territorial public action modernisation and the affirmation of

² The territorial authority which benefits from the general jurisdiction clause has a general capacity to intervention, without it being necessary for the law to list its powers. Consequently, each level of local government can claim competence in a specific field (transport, education, economic development, etc.).

metropolitan areas created a new status for 11 metropolitan areas (agglomerations with more than 400.000 inhabitants) with competences in economic development, innovation, energy transition and urban policy. Finally, on July 16, 2015, the National Assembly and the Senate definitively passed the law on the new territorial organisation of the Republic (or NOTRe law). All in all, it is from the 2000s that a process of decentralisation has really began, and this Act III marks a profound acceleration and a major change in the French territorial organisation, explaining why we have called it "a territorial big bang".

Table 1. Comparative summary of the distribution of competences

Area of competence	Regions	Departments	Municipalities
Economic development	Lead role Direct and indirect aid	Indirect aid	Direct aid
Vocational training, apprenticeship	Lead role - Definition of regional policy and implementation		
Employment and professional integration		Professional integration within the framework of the Active Solidarity Income program	
	Recruitment - possibility of assisted contracts promoting integration	Recruitment - possibility of assisted contracts promoting integration	Recruitment - possibility of assisted contracts promoting integration
Education	High schools (buildings, catering, staff)	Middle schools (buildings, catering, staff)	Elementary schools (buildings, catering, staff)
Culture, social life, youth, sports and leisure	Culture (heritage, education, creation, libraries, museums, archives)	Culture (heritage, education, creation, libraries, museums, archives)	Culture (heritage, education, creation, libraries, museums, archives)
			Childhood (nurseries, leisure centers)
	Sports (equipment and grants)	Sports (equipment and grants)	Sports (equipment and grants)
	Tourism	Tourism	Tourism
Social and medico-social action		Lead role - Organization and aid	Optional social actions
Urbanism			Planning Leadership role in spatial planning
Spatial planning	Regional plan for spatial planning and sustainable development (preparation)	Regional plan (opinion, approval)	Regional plan (opinion, approval)
	State-Region planning contract		
Environment	Natural areas	Natural areas	Natural areas
	Regional natural parks		
		Waste (departmental plan)	Waste (collection, treatment)
	Water (participation in the master plans for water development and management)	Water (participation in the master plans for water development and management)	Water (distribution, sanitation)
			Energy (distribution)
Major equipment and infrastructures	Inland ports	Seaports, commercial and fishing ports	Marinas
	Aerodromes	Aerodromes	Aerodromes
Roads	Regional Scheme	Departmental roads	Communal roads
Regional rail transport	Leader in intermodal transport. Rail transport (optional) Road and school transport outside urban areas		Public and school transport
Communication	Network management	Network management	Network management
Housing	Financing	Financing, park and assistance, plan and housing office	Financing, park and aid
Security			Security municipal police
		Traffic	Traffic and parking
		Crime prevention	Crime prevention
		Fire and rescue	

2. The challenges and issues of the territorial reform

Remapping and merging the Regions with one another, redefining the role of the departments, redesigning inter-municipality and encouraging the merger of municipalities, creating metropolitan areas, reducing the local authorities' expenditure, improving citizen proximity and involving them in the decision-making process in a more effective way: these are all the actions to be implemented within the framework of the latest decentralisation law in France. These territorial challenges (Cole, 2012) leave one cause for concern: the public authorities' ability to achieve objectives as varied as contradictory sometimes. In any case, it is obvious that the reform does not fundamentally call into question the French territorial organization.

2.1. Feedback on the stated objectives of the NOTRe Law

The argument which is most often put forward, and which is probably the most discussed as well (Mazzoleni, 2015), bears upon the rationalisation of public budgetary expenditure by increasing it from 22 to 13 regions (Pasquier, 2016). However, the latter spent 27.9 billion euros in 2012, that is to say only 22% of local and regional authorities' expenditure (out of a total of 225.9 billion), which does not seem excessive. This reform thus differs from the previous ones in that it does not aim to increase the volume of local finances but rather to rationalize them. It could be considered that savings should be made on the central government functioning (whose gross operating expenses amount to 235 billion euros in 2012) rather than on local authorities, which are the main investors in the local economy. As the French are very sensitive to this expenditure reduction issue, the Government justifies the budget savings on local authorities by promising to contain the increase in local taxation and to free up public investment capacities.

The second objective, linked to the previous one, is to achieve economies of scale by increasing the size of the regions. When the bill was presented, figures were given by André Vallini, the Secretary of State for the Territorial Reform, who announced savings of around 25 billion euros, soon to be reduced to 15. Today, it has to be said that many French regions have seen their operating budgets increase. According

to a study conducted by the Ifrap (the French Institute for the Research on Public Administration and Politics), spending in the thirteen new major regions increased by €2.6 billion between January 2016, when they were created, and 2017. For example, the Grand Est region's expenditure has increased by 14%, which represents 444 euros per inhabitant.

Since Tiebout (1960), a lot of research has been conducted on the economies of scale matter and their importance in local government processes (Bikker & van der Linde, 2016). The general trend is more in favour of concentration (Blom-Hansen et al. 2014; Drew et al. 2016), but it should be noted that 1) most of the studies bear upon mergers of municipalities and therefore upon volumes which are well below those considered here (Solé-Ollé and Bosch, 2005); 2) the optimal size varies according to the case and rarely exceeds 100.000 persons (Reingewertz, 2012). The question really arises in a situation of remoteness from decision-making centres. In other words, Regions which are the size of European countries for the most part. Even if savings are made on the operating items of the new Regions by eliminating duplication, reducing the number of elected representatives and pooling services, the fact remains that most of the expenditure – for example, Regional Express Trains or high schools – will not be halved, while the cost of overhauling services and longer journeys have an impact on budgets. Thus, the lower flexibility and loss of proximity resulting from the merger of regions can lead to additional costs for the community.

The third objective is about the search for an increase in the Regions' competitiveness (Brennetot, 2017). The idea is to incorporate France into the global competition with large, more visible and stronger entities and metropolises whose weight would be amplified. However, the underlying idea meaning that "big is beautiful" remains to be questioned. One may wonder if regions such as the Aquitaine or the Rhône-Alpes regions were so narrow that they had to be merged with other bordering ones. Several authors have already pointed out that there is no correlation between the size of the territorial community and their economic dynamism (Parkinson et al., 2015). Competitiveness cannot be decreed; it must be built within the framework of a long-term strategy and an adequate budget. Brennetot (2017) raises a contradiction in the will of a regulatory state which (i) advocates a rebalancing and wishes to

reduce inequalities between Regions by reducing their number, but (ii) at the same time accelerates decentralisation at the risk of increasing internal territorial disparities within each region. The cohesion sought at a given scale will not necessarily be achieved at other scales.

A final objective of the reform focuses on the simplification and clarification of the territorial millefeuille. The idea behind this task sharing is to simplify the daily lives of residents and companies in their efforts (who does what? who to contact?) in order to improve the effectiveness of aid mechanisms. The law thus withdraws the general jurisdiction clause for the Regions and departments, but not for the municipalities, which continue to benefit from it given the wide range of actions they must carry out with the populations. For example, the Region will have exclusive rights to direct aid to businesses and will establish a regional scheme with a prescriptive vocation in the fields of economic development, innovation and internationalisation (Table 1). However, reducing the number of regions does not automatically simplify the French territorial administrative organisation. We consider that the increase in the size of the regions will only accentuate the need for the local level of the department, whose future remains uncertain. In addition, due to the creation of metropolitan areas – whose aim is to replace departments – the rural territories issue remains unresolved (Torre and Wallet, 2014).

2.2. Questions about the method

Serious doubts have arisen as to the method used to reform the territorial organisation of the French Republic. First of all, the way things are done. This territorial reform is directly commissioned by Paris and the State services. The Jacobin State organizes a form of regionalization and metropolization which questions its capacities for reform or decentralization, not to mention federalization. We find here a top-down method while considering territorial specificities would often require tailor-made solutions. The "one size fits all" concept no longer works in European regions and it is necessary to implement more territorialized policies (Bourdin, 2018), as promoted by the EU with smart specialization measures (Foray, 2014; McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2015). In practice, no consultation has been or will be carried out in this context of territorial reform, whereas the principles of participatory democracy and

stakeholder involvement in bodies and decisions are topical in many countries of the world (Behrend and Whitehead, 2016).

This reform reveals a French tradition in which elected officials often refuse to involve citizens in the development of public policies (Pasquier, 2014 and 2015). Yet the few examples of citizen participation (in the preparation of urban planning documents, for instance) have shown that this involvement not only improves the democratic debate quality, but also helps significantly the citizens to accept the constraints imposed by the public authorities. Moreover, only a few local elected officials were consulted during the reform process, and they were often in conflict with the decisions taken by the government.

Then, comes the timing issue. The process was launched by surprise, in a hurry, without any prior preparation, as if the urgency was unavoidable. However, no one seriously believed that, in the face of the crisis, rising inequality and stalled growth, the very first necessity was to reform the country's territorial organization. Waiting for this urgently implemented territorial reform to resolve territorial disparities and associated problems in France (Loughlin and Seiler, 2001; Talandier et al., 2016) seemed illusory.

Moreover, during the 1982 regionalization, plenty of preliminary studies made it possible to compare the divisions with different scenarios based on historical, geographical or economic foundations, for a final intermediate choice between the historical regions, close to the departments, and five major economic regions, based on the areas of influence of major cities. However, these reports were apparently ignored in the preparation process of the 2015 reform.

3. Issues raised by the big bang for the regions: the cost of the territorial reform, and what about the places which do not matter?

Given the challenges raised and the objectives set by the last territorial reform, it seems interesting to take a close look at its results and to examine both its positive effects and limits, along with the consequences for the territories which, according to our analysis, have been left out of this territorial big bang.

3.1 What are the benefits and costs of the reform?

Today, we can look back on the expected results of the reform and the passed laws, and particularly point out their advantages or the risks they represent for the Republic's organization, but also the territories and the different levels of governance in France.

The argument which is often put forward in favour of spatial reorganization bears upon the rationalisation of public action and the clarification of competences between the different territorial authorities. This general competence clause exists in France, the United Kingdom and Ireland ("general competence"), or in Germany ("allgemeine Zuständigkeitsvermutung"). It stipulates that local authorities have the right to decide on all matters they themselves consider important. This general competence rule has been adopted in most of continental Europe and is often seen as a consequence of the subsidiarity principle (Merloni, 2016). However, in France, it was decided to remove this clause, arguing that the omni-competence of each territorial authority (Region, Department, Intercommunality, Commune) generated redundancies and overlaps in public actions, making policies sometimes ineffective. The law MAPTAM leads to a limited but very real redistribution of competences, specifically between Regions and departments. From now on, economic planning – such as direct aid to companies – is reserved for the Regions, and social action and solidarity for the departments, while municipalities and their groups are in charge of urban planning and the organisation of everyday public services (Table

1). From this point of view, the abolition of the general competence clause can be considered as a step forward in helping to identify the devolution of each level, putting a curb on the dispersal of expenditure and limiting the willingness to intervene in all directions. At the same time, however, as Merloni (2016) points out, the competences of each authority are not fully defined despite the reform and the devolution of regions continue to request clarification.

The second achievement of the reform is that it has increased the legitimacy of the role played by the Regions, if only thanks to the media coverage of the debate on their geographical borders and the groupings they have brought about. This discussion contributed to their definitive recognition as one of the major organizations of the French State's structure, before the departments or municipalities, to such an extent that no one disputes their pre-eminent place in the architecture of the Republic nowadays. Finally, with a few exceptions, the dimensions are consistent and the population volumes are expected to have mass effects. It can be considered that the Regions will thus reach a critical size which is more favourable to reindustrialisation processes, aid to companies or infrastructure financing. It is also to be expected that they will play a more important role on the European scale, and thus more effectively bring the hopes and initiatives coming from the territories into international competition.

However, in addition to these positive points, it is easy to identify several potential disadvantages or limits, corresponding to the risks the reform represents for both communities and populations.

The first and most obvious problem is related to the size of the new regions; some have become so large that it is difficult to find the equivalent in other European countries (in particular the Occitanie and Nouvelle Aquitaine regions, which are almost as large as Austria). Apart from the Nouvelle Aquitaine region, which accounted for the majority of the members of the general management team in the former capital of Aquitaine (Bordeaux), the merged regions very early on showed their desire to preserve their territorial balance. This wish resulted in the maintenance of sites located in the capitals of the former regions. The desire not to give the feeling of one region being "absorbed" by another may have led to a distinction between the administrative capital, the headquarters of deliberative work, and

the regional host (for example, in the case of the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region). For the sake of balance, the merged regions also wished not to hold their deliberative assemblies (plenary assembly and standing committee) on a single site, as much as possible. For example, the Regional Council of Normandie has established its headquarters in Caen but decided to hold two annual meetings in Rouen and one in Le Havre, while the Nouvelle Aquitaine region is supposed to establish a few committees in Limoges and Poitiers, in addition to Bordeaux. Multi-site locations lead to managerial difficulties which are not negligible and the additional costs generated by the fragmentation between sites have neither been measured nor monitored thus far. Moreover, the merger of the regions has required the alignment of civil servants' salaries in the former regions to the most favourable salary. For example, the levelling cost €10M to the Normandie region.

Table 2: additional annual spending on wages for the French regions between 2016 and 2021 (source: report of the regional court of auditors)

Regions	Total annual increase in salaries between 2016-2021
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	€3 to 4 million
Bourgogne-Franche-Comté	€2 million
Grand Est	€16 million
Hauts-de-France	€0.65 million
Normandie	€10 million
Nouvelle-Aquitaine	€14 to 17 million
Occitanie	€3.7 million

This led to an increase in expenses. For example, the Occitanie region has chosen not to hold any of its plenary meetings in the regional capital: its regional council meets in plenary session in Montpellier, not Toulouse. This organisation is the result of a desire for balance within the merged region and of a commitment by the president, prior to the merger, when the latter, a time questioned by the Senate, was still uncertain. Moreover, neither of the two hemicycles can accommodate the 150 elected members of the regional council: while the one located in Toulouse could be the subject of development work for this purpose, for an amount estimated at €7M by the local authority, the configuration of the one in Montpellier excludes any possibility of substantial resizing. The local authority is therefore calling

on a service provider to organise these sessions at the Montpellier 120 exhibition centre, for an initial unit cost of €140.000, which has been reduced to €98.000.

Moreover, it is obvious that this increase in volume is encouraging some of the population to move away from decision-making centres, particularly from the regional capital. Many elected or local officials are thus more than two or three hours' drive away from their regional capital, and will find it difficult to have themselves heard and to represent the voices and interests of the citizens. This distance could lead to a feeling of a new removal of the State from rural or peripheral territories, considered as abandoned (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018 ; Bourdin et Tai, 2021). We can thus expect a decrease in the quality, or even a lack or suppression, of local services in a context of cost reduction. This phenomenon is already observed in many rural areas and is causing concern among rural elected officials, who have several times mobilized against the harmful effects of the new law. One can recall that in other European countries, such as the United Kingdom (McCann, 2016) or Spain (Nel and Gomà, 2018), these decisions to leave certain territories aside may have led to the creation of a discontent geography causing problems in terms of rising populism (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018; European Commission, 2018 ; Bourdin et al., 2021). The recent yellow vest crisis in France shows that the forgotten territories matter and that issue needs to be addressed in the country as well.

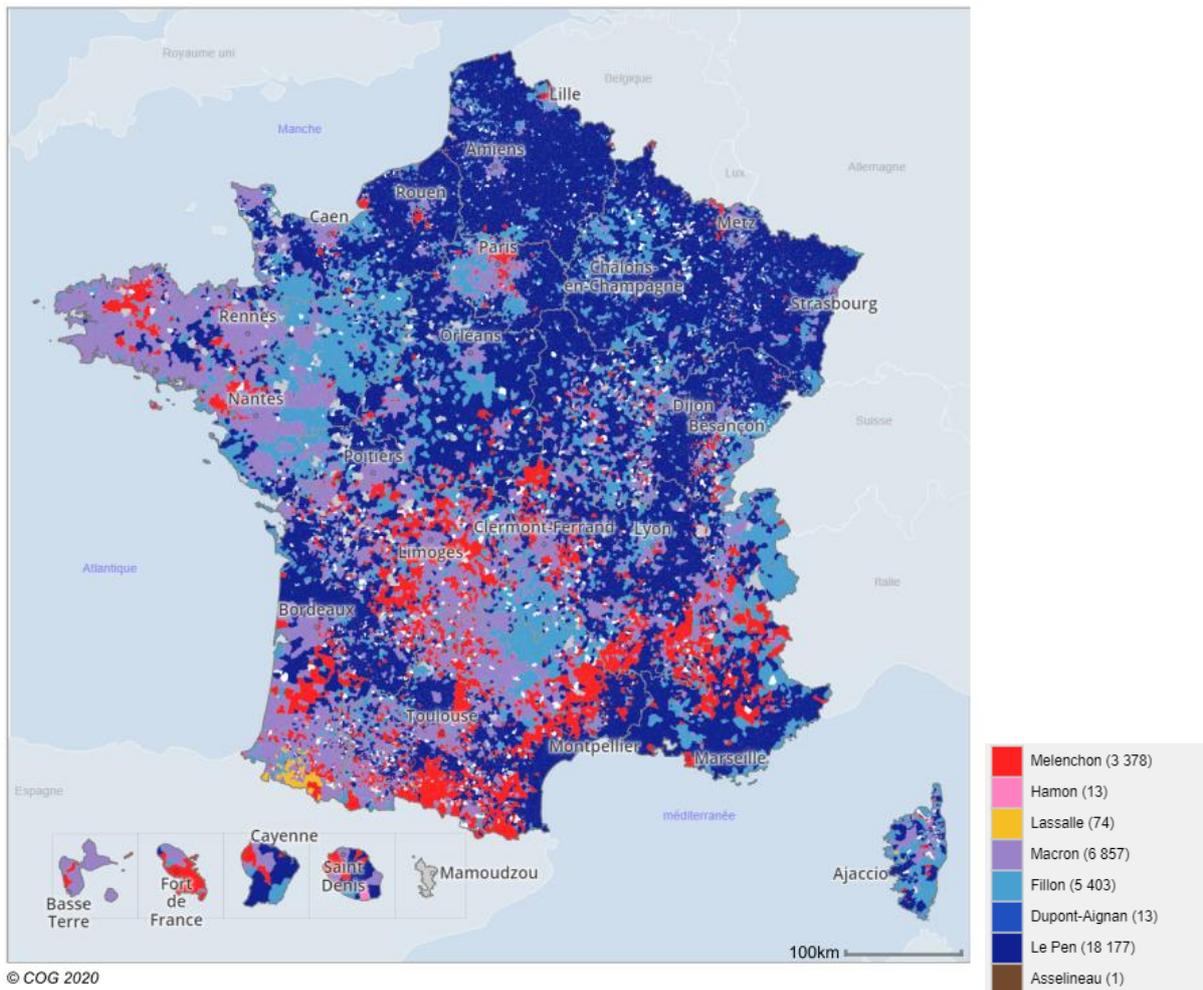
3.2. Risks for some territories which have been forgotten in the territorial reform

It is clear that the reform benefits some territories more than others. What is important, and this is our opinion, is that the reform is likely to systematically benefit specific types of territories (i.e. the most urbanised ones) and disadvantage some others (i.e. rural areas). The territorial reform seems to be based on the idea that France is above all a urban country, whose organisation should be structured around a number of large cities and then, through successive breakdowns, medium-sized municipalities or inter-municipalities, in order to create a network of rural areas. In the final texts of the reform, it is above all the metropolises which are put forward and are the focus of attention in every respect, with the future of France emerging from its most densely populated territories. We argue that the territorial

reform has forgotten some territories (specifically the rural ones), and this has direct consequences for these territories which have been left behind.

Firstly, in terms of democracy or the representation of opinions and the voice of the people. As already mentioned, the reform was undertaken without consulting or involving the local populations in the decision-making process, which is in contradiction with the European Charter of Local Self-Government (1985) whose preamble and first article insist on the citizens' right to participate in the affairs' administration and on the necessity for public authorities to interact with them locally in the best possible and direct way (Mikheev, 2014). This lack of local consultation and bottom-up logic in the territorial reform only reinforced the disenchantment of a part of the electorate with French politics. Moreover, we argue that, by strengthening metropolises to the detriment of rural territories, the territorial reform has contributed to a rising feeling of inequality between urban and rural territories. The result has been a significant increase in votes in favour of radical parties during the last presidential elections (from 6.5 to 7.5 million voters for the *Rassemblement National* party between 2012 and 2017), particularly in the territories left behind by public policies and set aside of the Act III of decentralization (rural territories, declining industrial territories) (see map 1) (Bourdin and Tai, 2021).

Map 1. 2017 Presidential Election, Round 1 - leading candidates



The idea of entrusting the future of France to metropolitan areas raises serious doubts about the future of sparsely populated areas, which are considered, in the best case scenario, to be at the service of large urban areas. In addition to the fact that such an option has overlooked the particularly significant growth of these areas in recent years (even if its volume remains low, of course), it neglects some of these territories' very particular dimensions (Torre and Wallet, 2016). First of all, it should be recalled that France's wealth – a country deprived of mining and energy resources – lies above all in two assets: on the one hand, its landscapes and its diversity, resulting from the variety of its *terroirs* and its climatic and geomorphological varieties; and on the other hand, the quality and diversity of its human resources, with extremely varied skills and experience, depending on the location, origins and types of production.

Conclusion

The issues raised by the implementation of the 2014-2017 territorial laws are numerous. First of all, this is a funding matter. The merger of regions has resulted in additional costs (for example, coordination costs) which resulted in reduced or shrinking services to the population in some territories. The second issue is geographical. The regions' size increase has created a distance between the decision-making places and those where the inhabitants live, as well as between the decisions taken by the administrative services and the population. The third problem is related to identity. Inter-communalities, metropolization and large regions are often characterized by boundaries and denominations which are new. However, some citizens are questioning the symbolism and cultural identity of megaregions such as the Grand Est and the Nouvelle Aquitaine regions. Hence the following questions: when a new name is given to an administrative territory with no apparent logic, what cultural feeling and, therefore, what motivation do the inhabitants have? To what extent can they manage to agree with a perimeter without geographical or historical logic and whose precise competences are difficult to understand? Aren't they likely to experience difficulties in getting involved in the social life of a territory with which they do not identify? This raises a broader final issue, that of democracy. The yellow vest movement is very significant in terms of desire from those who claim to be part of this revolt to obtain more direct and participatory democracy, but also to feel considered by politicians and policies. Indeed, democracy is first and foremost local, and about the participation of inhabitants in the life of the territory they live in. Hasn't this question of citizenship, which is therefore central, been forgotten during the 2014-2017 territorial laws in favour of a search for the "big is beautiful" concept and an ever-increasing distance from the decision-making and power centres? We try to assess these various dimensions in Table 3.

Table 3: An assessment of the effects of the territorial reform

	In terms of democracy	In terms of costs	Urban/rural divide
General competence clause	Positive	Beneficial	Neutral
Strengthening of the regions' role	Positive	Neutral	In favour of urban areas
Size of the new regions	Negative	Costly	In favour of urban areas
Accent on metropolises	Neutral	Neutral	In favour of urban areas

In this context, we believe that the geographical proximity relationship must be preserved, especially since some territories have been left out of this reform, due to the strengthening roles of the regions and metropolises. The decline in the provision of public services in many peripheral territories, leading to a feeling of frustration and abandonment from the State, is a reality. This is the case in a number of small and medium-sized rural cities which are declining as the agricultural sector gets less important and few alternatives are available. Consequently, suffering from a lack of connections with the major productive centres, it is difficult for these regions to reinvent themselves and reactivate an economic dynamic. However, we believe that a large proportion of the future jobs will not depend on the international competitiveness of a few companies located in metropolitan areas, but on endogenous economic dynamics and local economic systems, particularly those located in rural areas. So, would the new laws finally be an opportunity for the territories lost at the borders of macro-Regions and far from the Public Authorities?

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