A contextual explanation of regional governance in Europe: insights from inter-municipal cooperation

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Abstract: Cooperation among fragmented local entities for service delivery is a common practice in Europe that has been understudied from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view.Drawing on the ICA framework,this article advances and tests a contextual explanation of the emergence of interlocal collaborations by following a second-generation rational choice approach to the study of regional governance.Doing so, it systematically addresses:how context matters in specific choice situations;how the establishment of various governance structures with different characteristics depends on specific contextual factors that can simultaneously reduce transaction costs and risks for cooperative actors;and the practical policy implications of these choices.

1. Introduction

Though inter-municipal cooperation (IMC) is progressively becoming a central topic in the study of European local government (Denters and Rose 2005; Swianewicz and Teles, 2018a; Teles and Swianewicz, 2018a), few studies have advanced theoretical or empirical analysis regarding choices among various cooperative arrangements (Eytórsson et al., 2018). Empirical studies that examined factors influencing the self-organization solutions for regional governance were limited to cross-national comparisons aimed to analyse the selected inter-municipal agreements (IMAs) without an in-depth analysis of their internal configurations. Furthermore, during previous decades, European scholars produced a complex variety of research methodologies and theoretical approaches that «makes it a herculean task to attempt to provide a comprehensive outlook of research» (Teles 2016, 23). This article contributes to this current debate on the emergence of IMAs in Europe from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view. First and foremost, it proposes the adoption of the Institutional Collective Action Framework (ICA) on the study of IMC in order to understand both how different regional contextual factors can simultaneously affect the choices of municipal actors to decide if and how to form an IMA, and the policy implications of these choices. Doing so, it presents original data on the technical, political, and organizational features of a set of IMAs established in different sub-national contexts, empirically investigating the influence that different regional contextual factors have on their creation.

By assuming that IMC in Europe results from the combined effects of financial incentives, regulatory obligations, and persuasion (Norton, 1994), and that European municipal actors are rational and goal-oriented (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007), this article follows an increasingly influential theoretical stance on the study of regional governance that interprets the emergence of cooperative governance arrangements as resulting from dependence on specific contextual and institutional factors that reduce transaction costs of cooperation for local actors (Feiock 2007, 58). It shows that a contextual explanation of regional governance is useful for understanding also what influences European municipal actors in choosing their cooperative arrangements, since in Europe it is «the interaction between external factors, the institutional context and the preferences structures of local government that in the end determines the patterns of cooperation and the shifts therein» (Hulst et al. 2009, 279). Even though the ICA framework is gaining popularity in the study of regional governance, by being applied in different fields and cases - ranging from the US (e.g., Andrew 2009), to both the Chinese (e.g., Yi and Cui, 2018), and the European context (e.g. Tavers and Feiock, 2018) - few scholars have considered ICA as the unit of analysis for explaining the variations in agreement forms (Yi et al., 2017). In this context, moreover, the aims to examine the simultaneous influence of different contextual factors on supra-municipal choices, on one hand, and to understand the pratical policy implications of these choice, on the other hand, were only desidered from an empirical point of view (Feiock 2007; 2009; 2013).

Empirically, this article examines how two different contextual factors - namely, the policy tools provided by the upper level of government (financial incentives and persuasion campaigns) and the municipal administrative traditions - simultaneously affect the calculus of

municipal actors by reducing the transaction risks and the information barriers for European municipal actors when choosing the interlocal arrangements and their internal features. In order to limit the presence of possible intervening variables related to regulatory constraints of different countries or external factors, this article analyses why and how the municipal actors decided to structure their inter-municipal choices regarding co-management of municipal functions in two European regions belonging the same country (Italy). By comparing IMC in two sub-national contexts, varying characteristics of these IMAs are expected to surface, depending on the different uses of financial incentives and persuasion by regional governments, as well as on the municipal administrative traditions.

Considering the different meaning and forms IMC assumed in Europe (see Hulst et al., 2009), the definition provided by the Council of Europe et al. will be used for this article (2010, p. 7): «IMC is when two or more municipalities agree to work together on any of the tasks assigned to them in order to gain mutual benefits». The focus is on IMAs that only involve municipalities for the joint management of one or more of their functions, and that presents a different institutionalized nature based on the Italian national legislation. This enables to analyse interests that motivate the same type of local actors (e.g. local governments) in establishing IMAs.

The article will proceed as follows: section 2 briefly reviews the main literature on IMC in Europe; section 3 presents the theoretical background; section 4 illustrates the main characteristics of the Italian IMC context; section 5 introduces the research design; section 6 presents the results of the empirical analysis; section 7 concludes.

2. What is Inter-Municipal Cooperation? An European Perspective

Cooperation among municipalities for service delivery is a common practice in Europe (Teles and Swianewicz, 2018b). Since cooperative arrangements historically assumed multiple forms across European countries, several scholars (among them: Hulst and van Montfort, 2007; Teles, 2016; Teles and Swianewicz, 2018b) tried to explain what forms IMC has based on the domestic contexts within which it is formulated. The first solution considers the number of associated functions, distinguishing between single-purpose and multi-purpose organizations. The second considers the more-or-less institutionalized nature of IMAs. For example, Teles (2016, 19) distinguished between hard and soft cooperation describing the former as «usually driven through informal relations between agents with non-legally binding agreements», while the latter «takes legal form and results in contracts between all partners involved [and] it requires structures of decision-making, and carefully assessing costs and benefits» (ivi). Based on different domestic constraints, the decision of creating a specific type of IMA can also be voluntary or obligatory. Moreover, IMC «can be restricted to municipalities, but local governments can also extend their cooperative arrangements to include other public authorities [...] or private sector organizations» (Hulst et al. 2009, 272). Finally, the types of associated functions: IMAs can be established to co-manage both back-office or front-office municipal functions, and wide area functions.

This diversity in forms discourages European scholars to provide comparative research with relevant information (Wayenberg and Kuhlmann, 2018). The main comparative

analysis thus far encompasses national preferences regarding the characteristics of IMC (Bolgherini, 2011; Wollmann 2010), and the institutional nature of IMAs in Europe, grounded in different administrative traditions of a single country (Hulst and van Montfort, 2012; Swianiewicz, 2011). A recent comparative study showed that municipalities in Spain engage in partnerships under a joint authority in governance in which all of them play a role, and that in the Netherlands IMAs involve a few municipalities whose joint efforts to provide this service are run as a public service (Bel et al. 2010, 486). The Spanish cooperation is compatible with privatizing the production of local services (Bel and Fageda 2008), while in the Netherlands public production is preserved (Bel et al. 2010). As in France, Spanish municipal governments retain total authority regarding shared services (Bel et al., 2014). In her comparative studies on IMC in Italy, Spain and Germany, Bolgherini (2011; 2014) showed that cooperative arrangements serve only an administrative purpose in the former two countries, while in Germany IMAs are more oriented towards the territorial economic development. Lastly, a comparative study on eight European countries - Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom - underlined the presence of some trend in Europe (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007). First of all, there is a prevalence of multi-functional agreements (except in Spain and the Netherlands); and of permanent organizations, with a high level of institutionalization (except in the United Kingdom). In addition, while the involvement of public actors at a higher level is generally avoided, public-private cooperation is exclusively used to intercept European funds and to pursue territorial development goals. Regarding the latter, moreover, research studies (Teles and Swianiewicz, 2018b) have shown that public-private cooperation to pursue local development strategies has become a widespread occurrence during previous years. On the incentive of the European Union, in fact, several initiatives (e.g. smart specialization strategy, EU cluster) had been used in order to create new cooperation forms among local governments and private actors in the field of research and innovation, that are focused on achieving IMC. Nevertheless, the spread of these initiatives is not linear across European countries, and it continues to be mainly influenced by the different national institutional settings.

Despite various existing forms, some regularities are identifiable regarding experiences across different European countries. IMAs' creation is oriented towards the achievement of economies of scale (Bel and Warner, 2015; Steiner, 2003) and the provision of better services (Bel and Fageda, 2008; Kersting and Vetter, 2003) through the delivery of local public services at an optimal territorial size (Council of Europe et al., 2010). The increase of IMAs aligns with recent reform trends of European local government systems (Kuhlmann and Bouckaert, 2016) that decentralize and/or devolve power from central to local authorities (Teles, 2016). Resulting from these reform trends, collaborative experiences in Europe are more structured and formal than in the US, where local governments benefit from low levels of inter-governmental aids (Bel and Warner, 2015). Voluntary and informal cooperation in the US is therefore only influenced by the degree of transaction risks and the reciprocal exchange relationships municipalities face (Feiock, 2007; Holzer and Fry 2011), as well as by specific city and regional characteristics (Hefetz, et al., 2012; Warner and Hefetz, 2012). Whereas in Europe, IMAs are highly dependent on decisions of the higher level of government regarding restructuring local government systems (Hulst et al., 2009; Swianewicz and Teles, 2018b), as well as on antecedent inter-municipal collaboration

(Bergholz, 2018; Raudla and Tavares, 2018), and/or the historical presence of territorial and cultural homogeneity (Teles 2016). Being aware that these factors in Europe explain the structuring of various cooperative arrangements, most researches started from a macro perspective by comparing the characteristics of IMAs on the basis of the different national administrative, and institutional contexts and the related reform strategies (Giacomini et al., 2018.). Generally speaking, local governments in Southern Europe had been traditionally community-based organizations (Bennet, 1993) and their countries' national regulations impose less constraints on inter-municipal agreements compared to the Northern ones (Wollmann, 2010), and the use of legal or financial incentives directly addressed to cooperation are preferred to top-down strategies (Hulst and van Montfort, 2007).

3. Theoretical Background

The multiple forms and scope IMC had assumed across different countries inevitably proliferated different theoretical stances explaining why cooperation occurs. Four major traditional approaches can be distinguished (see Teles and Kettunen 2016): i) the political economy model, in which cooperation is only an instrument of generating economies of scale, with local agents able to ponder its potential political and economic costs and benefits; ii) the network theory approach, that interprets cooperation as a way of increasing governance practices that benefit agents; iii) the public choice argument, that views competition among municipalities as dangerous for supra-municipal agreements due to the high institutional barriers it provided in highly polycentric areas; iv) the collective action approach, which considers cooperation as an instrument used by elected officials to extract political benefits.

Contemporary literature on IMC is mostly a variant of the rational choice approach (Teles, 2016). The second-generation rational choice models explicitly take into account the contexts of collective decisions, with the aim to generate testable propositions able to systematically address how the calculus of the actors in single choice situations are affected by specific contextual characteristics (Ostrom, 2005). Considering this, the ICA enabled discussion related to factors influencing inter-local collaborative agreements (Feiock 2009; 2013). It focuses on explaining how alternative mechanisms for sustaining collective actions among local government actors are selected (Feiock, 2004; Feiock and Scholz, 2010). The ICA's theoretical stances state that governance structures depend on contextual factors and that they emerge from a dynamic political contractual process in which a Pareto-efficient solution (Coase, 1960) is possible when benefits exceed the transaction costs of negotiating an agreement (Feiock 2007, 47). Specific community characteristics and formal or informal institutional arrangements can reduce the transition risks and the information barriers for local agents: cooperation can be facilitated from homogeneity in interest or pre-existent networks of relationships among local agents (Feiock 2007; 2009), but also regional diffusion mechanisms and regional governance bodies can reduce contractual risks (Hefetz et al. 2015; Thurmaier and Wood 2002; Wood 2006).

As said, the rational choice approach has been gaining popularity over the last decade in IMC studies in Europe (Casula, 2016; Gjertsen, 2014; Hulst and van Montfort, 2007; Feiock and Tavares, 2018). European scholars (Hulst et al., 2009; Norton, 1994; Teles 2016;

Teles and Kettun 2016) argued that IMC is the result of the combined effects of financial incentives, regulatory obligations, and persuasion, and that the way in which upper level government (central or regional governments) approaches the issue of IMC is central in influencing the characteristics of the joint authorities (Heinelt and Kuebler, 2005; Bel and Gradus, 2018). The incentive structures related to IMC may explain not only the different trends in emerging IMAs, but also the characteristics of the cooperative arrangements present (Hulst and van Montfort 2007, 13). Following Feiock and Tavares (2017, p. 302), a challenge to expand the ICA framework in Europe appeared therefore «to account for how different national institutional contexts structure the configuration and the preferences of the actors, the selection of the tasks for collective action and the arrangements available to solve collective dilemmas».

These theoretical assumptions have come under empirical scrutiny in comparative studies aimed at interpreting the general diffusion of IMAs in two or more European countries, while the role of the regional governments in facilitating cooperation has yet to be thoroughly analysed (Bel et al., 2013; Bel and Warner, 2015). To fill this gap, the coopetition strategy literature may be useful for the purpose of this article. By using insights gained from game theory to understand when it is advantageous for competitors to cooperate for achieving mutually beneficial outcomes, part of this literature, in fact, emphasized the role that the institutional environment (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; DiMaggio 1991), in which an organization operates, has in inducing a coopetitive behaviour. In his seminal work, Mariani (2007), for example, analyzed the key role the regional policy maker played in inducing, through the imposition of cooperation, the emergence of coopetitive strategic behaviors among competing Italian opera houses. He showed that, due to the shift from a competitive to a partially cooperative environment, in an induced-coopetition context «individual actors may be forced to alter their (competitive) relations with each other and the appropriate courses of action to deal with the actual environment in order to respond to the changing nature of their enacted environment» (Mariani 2007, 120). In these terms, the coopetition strategy is understood as a process guided by external forces that are able to influence and modify the managerial decision making, the managerial cognitive maps and strategic learning paths. Various sources provided examples where similar coopetitive behaviours could be observed in diverse fields, such as tourism (e.g. Kylänen and Rusko, 2011), insurance companies (e.g. Okura, 2007), innovation in R&D work (e.g. Soekijad & Andriessen, 2003), and also in the field of metropolitan governance. Concerning the final field, by recognising that a place defined by legal boundaries is not a meningful product (Williams, 1999), scholars agree that cities have to simultaneously behave as both competitors and partners «to combine two or more places together in order to provide a more attractive offer» (Hankinson 2001, 130). Following this theoretical perspective, Moilaned and Rainisto (2009, 27) argued, for example, that a single city has to cooperate with the adjacent ones to be part of a "larger location" for place branding purposes. In this respect, branding is the result of a positive-sum game, since within a metropolitan area all cities (regardless of their size) can reach a critical mass by pooling resources.

Such evidences coming from the coopetition strategic literature contribute to demonstrate that the application of a second-generation rational choice approach to the study of regional governance should prefer a comparative analysis at a sub-national level when it

comes to analysing the emergence of cooperative arrangements in the European context. In fact, within a common national regulatory framework, and on the basis of their general strategy for municipal rescaling (Broekema et al., 2016), regional governments can approach IMC differently, by allocating financial contributions only if IMAs have specific demographic, dimensional, and organizational features. In doing so, they can also use parallel policy support tools, such as formal and informal meetings with municipalities, persuasion campaigns, technical assistance, etc. According to the ICA framework, these specificities of a single regional context can maximize the benefits of potential collaboration as they increase the economic benefits while also reducing the costs of information and coordination that might affect co-operative actors in choosing their own governance structures and the way in which they are processed. A regional policy maker can in this way induce cooperative behaviours among cities and municipalities. In other terms, contrasting the public choice argument, induced coopetition can limit competition among adjacent local authorities, by increasing their cooperative behaviours to facilitate them to reach a critical mass. Guided by external forces, this cooperative process may also consequently modify the managerial decision making.

Based on this theoretical background, it is first of all expected that in a regional context, where a well-structured use of both financial incentives and persuasion activities is present, agents would structure their associative choices with a tendency to maximize the potential benefits offered by the regional incentive system. The first theoretical proposition is thus provided:

Proposition 1: If a well-structured regional strategy is present in terms of financial incentives and persuasion campaigns, the associative choices of the municipal actors tend to align with regional preferences because the potential benefits offered were enough to reduce potential transaction risks of cooperation.

Noting that cooperation in Europe increases governance practices that agents benefit from, Teles and Kettun (2016, 143) underlined that «without formal incentives, trust and informal rules can play a relevant role in the decision to share service delivery, particularly in those contexts where territorial identity is strong». In line with previous studies on local government that considered its organization as the reflection of the historical development of the respective region (Bel and Warner, 2016), above all in Southern Europe (Bolgherini, 2014; Kuhlmann and Bouckaert, 2016), local government jurisdiction would reflect the homogeneity of the preferences of the municipal actors, and the latter would influence their ability to self-organize for public service delivery (Feiock 2009, 369). According to the ICA framework, homogeneity across local governments signals potential common interests and shared policy problems (Feiock 2007, 54), since by negotiating an agreement, public officials have enough knowledge about their counterparts to understand their preferences and motivations. Therefore in a regional context where the regional government deliberately chose to use financial incentives and persuasion campaigns to a lesser degree, the transaction and information costs can be reduced because of homogeneity among actors. As previously described, current community characteristics in Europe mainly reflect a long tradition of

cooperative arrangements and different paths local governments took. A second theoretical proposition is thus provided:

Proposition 2: In the absence of a well-structured regional strategy in terms of financial incentives and persuasion campaigns, the associative choices of the municipal actors are influenced by municipal administrative traditions, because the latter is able to offer them enough knowledge about their counterparts.

The two aforementioned theoretical propositions advance understanding of the simultaneous influence of different contextual factors that structure the preferences of municipal actors by reducing the transaction costs of cooperation for local actors. As underlined by the Council of Europe *et al.* (2010, 38-41), different coordination problems may occur when establishing IMAs because municipal agents have to examine potential risks and advantages during all the phases of the cooperative process. They first have to identify potential partners, choose the size and the nature of an IMC, then discern competences and powers to be transferred to cooperative arrangements, etc. Each public organization then made crucial decisions about establishing representative structures and ad hoc officers, and the development of co-operative mechanisms. It is therefore necessary to introduce some common dimensions regarding IMC whose analysis could help in understanding the influence of contextual factors on why and how municipal actors structure their supra-municipal choices (Hulst and Van Montfort, 2007, 2012; Silva and Pano, 2017; Tavares and Camões, 2010; Teles, 2016). Understood as public organizations (Hulst et al., 2009; Silva et al., 2018), IMAs can be investigated by analysing:

- what motivations municipal actors have when choosing partners for establishing an IMA with, as well as the type of joint authority based on individual national legislations (strategic dimension of the IMC);
- how municipal actors decide to organize the structural characteristics of their IMAs regarding internal organization and the boundaries of these entities (structural dimension of the IMC);
- the present supra-municipal governance practices, by looking not only at the activities of the political organs of the IMAs, but also at the relations among the joint authority and both the citizens and the territory (governance dimension of the IMC).

4. The Italian IMC Context

According to the ICA framework, the Italian context is a good laboratory for analysing how specific contextual factors - namely, the regional policy tools and the municipal administrative traditions - are simultaneously able to reduce the transaction costs faced by municipal actors and to provide high benefits for cooperation, by influencing how they choose and structure their inter-local arrangements on the basis of a set of alternative solutions. In an attempt to implement fast processes of territorial reforms and devolution

mechanisms, recent national reforms had in fact encouraged the institutionalization of soft or hard forms of cooperation restricted to municipalities (Bolgherini et al. 2018a; 2018b). In this sense, as compared to other European contexts, IMC in Italy is mainly used for administrative purposes, with a national legislation that pushes towards the integration of a significant number of municipal tasks into a single upper-scale entity, rather than to favour public-private cooperation initiatives to pursue local development initiatives (Teles 2016, 59). To better understand this, it is appropriate to introduce the evolution of IMC in national legislation. As in the case of other institutions of Italian local government, the latter can be described in terms of the pendulum metaphor (Bolgherini and Lippi, 2016).

Although informally admitted since the early years of the twentieth century (Dente, 1991), L. 142/1990 officially recognized three types of IMAs for the joint management of the municipal functions among municipalities − municipal unions (MUs), conventions, and consortia. The main differences among these bodies are based on different types and dimensions of the IMAs described in section 2. MUs are used for the co-management of two or more municipal functions and imply a strong political agreement between municipal administrations, leading to the creation of a local authority to all effects, with its own political and technical bodies. Conventions do not represent technical or political bodies, being mere agreements between two or more municipalities. Consortia are mono-functional business entities with a more-or-less voluntary nature. The first legislative provision requires all municipalities involved in a MU to merge within 10 years of its creation.

Since the end of 1990s, the national policy maker drastically changed its approach towards a more decentralised one: law 265/1999 made the creation of MUs voluntary, and starting from 2006, a process of regionalising national incentives began, as financial incentives were now directly managed by the regions. The regions also had to modify their incentive systems based on national regulations in order to gain access to these funds. The legislators put up forms of reward only for MUs. Simultaneously, regions could freely continue to incentivize their IMAs using endogenous resources, and in this case the regional policy makers could independently choose the financial criteria for having access to funds. Moreover, law 191/2009 foreshadowed consortia suppression, but left regions the possibility of their preservation, especially for those established before the law came into force.

Starting from 2010, the pendulum swung back to favour central government, which occurred for three reasons. Firstly, for the first time, the municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants had to co-manage all their basic functions through a MU and/or a convention. This new provision for small municipalities is known as ‘compulsory joint management’ of basic municipal tasks (CJM). Secondly, law 56/2014 endorsed the creation of MUs by introducing new organizational incentives for their creation, and by mandating regions to incentivize only these types of agreements. Thirdly, the national policy maker confirmed that the legal competence for associate management is pivotal. The enhanced role of state legislature «cannot do without the commitment and collaboration of the regions» (Tubertini 2015, 489). Even though re-centralization has recently taken place in this issue, the freedom that regional governments enjoy could lead to the creation of different models of IMC across Italian regions. Regions are free to decide which types of IMC to incentivize with their own endogenous resources, and in doing so, they can decide on the internal characteristics of

IMAs. Parallel to the financial incentives, Italian regional governments can also use different policy support tools in the field of IMC (Bolgherini et al. 2018a; 2018b).

As in other European countries, IMC in Italy can be traced back several decades ago (Fedele and Moini, 2007), and it was influenced by various municipal administrative traditions present across the Italian regions. Even though during the last 25 years several national reforms were introduced and a structure framework of cooperative arrangements for municipal services is present, IMC in Italy continues to be predominantly voluntary and it results from a deliberate decision rather than a mechanical implementation of a legal provision. Although small Italian municipalities have to co-manage their basic function, they are free to decide which cooperative arrangement to use and with which partners to comply the CJM with, as well as choose how to co-manage additional municipal functions. Beyond the previous municipal administrative traditions, these choices can be primarily influenced by how individual regional governments decide to approach the IMC issue.

5. Research Design

This paragraph presents the selected regional cases for empirical analysis, followed by the method used to investigate the influence of contextual factors on inter-local governance structures.

5.1. Regional Case Studies

The two regions selected - Emilia-Romagna and Veneto - fit with the theoretical foundations of this article not only because their regional governments used incentives and persuasive tools differently, but also because different municipal traditions prevailed in these regions (see Table 1). The main differences between Emilia-Romagna and Veneto are described in the following sections.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Emilia-Romagna

During the last decade, the strategy for municipal rescaling in Emilia-Romagna has been to reinforce supra-municipal governance to increase the quality and efficiency in providing municipal services. This was achieved by stimulating maximum adhesion of all municipalities to a MU, including the involvement of municipalities with more than 5,000 inhabitants. In order to realise these goals, the regional policy maker opted for structured use of financial and persuasive tools.

In terms of financial tools, it decided to use the same criteria for both regionalised national incentives and the endogenous one, and to allocate funds only to the MUs. It specified what basic characteristics MUs were to have in order to be financed (see Table 1). Additional funds were assigned to MUs that: perfectly coincide with the Socio-Sanitary

Districts (SSDs);[1] aggregate the largest number of municipalities; and co-manage the greatest number of municipal functions. Finally, no financial provisions for the transfer of municipal personnel to the MU were secured.

Regarding persuasion tools, it was common to use policies of close cooperation with local authorities in order to support them in the process of territorial reordering. Additionally, an "Inter-Institutional Conference on Territorial Integration" was established in 2015, where local and regional representatives frequently discussed the future of the IMC in Emilia-Romagna, either by forming proposals or by asking about possible management problems. The persuasive action of the regional policy maker focused on the use of deliberative and participatory practices within the MUs, since these can benefit from funds guaranteed by the Emilia-Romagna Participation Law, which finances the activation of these processes within sub-regional authorities (Casula, 2015).

While considering administrative traditions, the municipalities of this region had traditionally been at the core of local institutional architecture (Messina, 2012). It resulted in a great diffusion of networking forms among municipalities for the co-management of municipal functions with a high level of institutionalization since the 2000s (Baldini et al., 2009). Furthermore, there was a great involvement of institutional and socio-economic actors in the municipal strategic-management decisions (Leonardi and Nanetti, 1990), along with the diffusion of different forms of participation between municipalities and other public and private actors for public service delivery (Triglia, 1981; Ramella, 2005).

Veneto

The municipal rescaling strategy of the Venetian policy maker also focused on the consolidation of the IMC in Veneto, and the regional government clearly specified that «*the autonomy of municipalities is not brought into question by the intervention of the region* [since] it is up to the municipalities to choose the associated form considered more appropriate to the local reality [...] [and] which functions are prioritized in associate form».[2]

Based on this strategy, the regional policy maker used different criteria for allocating the two types of incentives. It first assigned the regionalised national incentives to the MUs of at least 5,000 inhabitants (decreased to 4,500 during 2015 and 2016) that manage at least two municipal functions (more or less basic), in an integral form. Additional resources were given depending on the type of municipalities involved and of the size of the MUs: the biggest contribution would be given to MUs that involve above all the CJM municipalities, and then those with 10,000-20,000 inhabitants. Endogenous resources had been granted to conventions, and also to the consortia present in this region before the approval of law 191/2009. Each of these IMAs should have been given a boost independently of their size, but in consideration of the number of associate functions, i.e. equal to two for the MUs and to one for the other IMAs. As in the case of the Emilia-Romagna Region, no provisions regarding the number of municipalities and the formal transfer of municipal staff to the new inter-municipal body were secured.

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[1] A SSD is composed of a set of municipalities belonging to the same Local Health Authority, within which social, welfare and health services are provided.

[2] Cfr. Attachment to the resolution of the Venetian regional council of 6 August 2013, n. 1417, *emphasis added.*

Regarding persuasion tools, the Veneto Region no longer plays a real part in managing the IMC issue, and where they were applied, the regional support actions were not very structured and they were rarely implemented.

Considering administrative traditions, the municipalities of this region were historically characterized by a strong territorial identity, and a local tradition of administrative individualism - that is a self-administration of local public services (Messina, 2012). This resulted in a low spread of IMAs that, where present, were in the form of soft cooperation involving above all only two municipalities for the co-management of few municipal functions. The unique municipalities of the region, traditionally more inclined to establish large IMAs, were the mountain ones. The municipal administrative individualism also influenced the governance practices of the Venetian municipal actors, the latter being less inclined to involve stakeholders, citizens, or external political actors in the strategic choices related to the management of municipal functions.

5.2. Method

The dimensions and relative sub-dimensions used to compare IMAs in the two studied regional contexts are presented in the next paragraph, followed by a presentation of the data source and the data analysis.

5.2.1. Dimensions of IMC

The first dimension, the strategic one (see Table 2), investigated the types of IMAs mostly used in the two regions, for both the small and all other municipalities, as well as the motivations that lead municipal actors to choose whether and with whom to cooperate.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

The second dimension, the structural one (see Table 3), analysed how municipal actors had decided to organize the structural characteristics of their IMAs, in terms of both internal organization and the boundaries of these entities. For this dimension, the study was limited to the MUs, not only because of their institutional nature as previously described, but also because any official national and/or regional dataset of other types of IMAs does not yet exist. To that end, a dataset including all the MUs of the two regions was first of all created: during mid-2016, there were 44 MUs both in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto (18 were in the mountainous territory in the former, and 19 in the latter). The «aggregate models» of MUs elaborated by ANCI-IFEL (2013) were also considered.[3] Using this classification was useful since the prevalence of a specific type of MU in a region can be influenced by the respective regional financial criteria. The analysis of characteristics of internal MU organisation

[3] By looking at the number of municipalities and the population involved, MUs can be classified as: "only big", i.e. MUs only with municipalities over 5,000 inhabitants; "only small", i.e. MUs only with municipalities with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants; "couples", i.e. MUs that involved only two municipalities; "satellite", i.e. MUs with several small municipalities "rotating" around a big one; "archipelago", i.e. MUs that combine heterogeneous municipalities.

considers the autonomy of the associative bodies compared to municipalities taking into account three indicators that inform about different technical aspects of MUs as technical bodies (Huntington, 1968; Lanzara, 1997): i) their organization structure (the presence of their own office); ii) their activities (the integrality of MUs in co-managing functions, i.e. the percentage of functions that are completely and directly managed by the MUs compared to those that are not integrally managed by the MUs, as part of the same function continues to be under the control of the municipalities); iii) their staff (the percentage of permanent staff within the body compared to the one transferred to the MU by the associate municipalities, but that continues to be formally part of the municipality's staff).

[Insert Table 3 Here]

Finally, the third dimension investigated how municipalities decided to structure their own supra-municipal governance (see Table 4). The political activities of the MUs in terms of the number of meetings of municipal councils and of the executive organs of the MUs (the so-called *giunte*), and the type and quantity of motions presented (horizontal governance) were investigated. The relations between the MUs and the citizens and between the MUs and the territory were also analysed by considering the forms of participatory democracy activated and the involvement of the main local stakeholders (vertical governance).

[Insert Table 4 Here]

5.2.2. Data Source

In line with previous research on regional governance (Andrew, 2009; Shrestha and Feiock, 2009; Zeemering, 2008), the field analysis simultaneously made use of different qualitative techniques to better investigate all the issues under scrutiny:

1. An analysis of the official reports on IMC described the general characteristics of IMAs in the two regions (elaborated by the regional unit of ANCI and by the official national organs);
2. A first set of 15 in-depth interviews with regional officials and members of the regional unit of ANCI, conducted from the beginning of 2014 to the end of 2016;
3. A web survey sent to the directors of all the MUs of the two regions, conducted at the end of 2016;
4. An analysis of the MUs' website and statutes;
5. A second set of 35 in-depth interviews with members of the regional unit of ANCI and local politicians and bureaucrats of the MUs, conducted during the middle of 2017.

Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended while scaling, closed and open-ended questions composed the survey. The next section introduces the informants.

[Insert Table 5 Here]

Informants

Informants include bureaucrats, politicians, and representatives of the local municipalities at different territorial levels (regional, supra-municipal, and municipal) from the two regional governance systems.

The main technical actors of the two regions able to provide impartial information on the characteristics of the respective regional governance system were engaged during the first set of interviews. Regional officers and representatives of the regional units of ANCI were contacted after an online search on the official website of the two institutional bodies and their organizational charts.

Having the goal to collect technical information on the MUs' characteristics, the web survey was sent to the highest bureaucratic official of the body which is supposed to have greater impartial judgment. The directors of the 88 MUs present in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto were therefore contacted, after an online search of the MUs' official website and their organizational charts. A pre-test was also administered.[4]

Informants from different institutional types were involved during the second set of interviews, being the aim to have more in-depth information on all the dimensions previously established during the first set of interviews and the survey. Following the snowball technique (Atkinson and Flint, 2004; Morgan, 2008) in selecting the interviewees, it was considered appropriate to start from a small group of initial informants of local politicians and bureaucrats of the MUs, and then extend the analysis and reach a new segment of population able to provide information on IMC for each of the three dimensions considered, in addition to those already collected. Both groups of interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes each. Following Miles and Huberman’s (1994) recommendations, the possible negative effects on the setting and the informants potentially deriving from the salience of the political information processed were minimized by keeping a low profile and clearly identifying the aim of the research and the processes of data collection and analysis (anonymity was guaranteed). Following Eisenhardt's guidelines (1989), the interviews were then transcribed and analysed manually within 24 hours, by including all data from the interview and noting down overall impressions regarding the interview and the interviewee. To avoid the limitations in using in-depth interviews (Della Porta and Keating, 2008), the information provided was then triangulated with other sources (thoroughly later described in section 5.2.3).

[4] Nine MUs were excluded as preliminary analysis showed two of them were in the process of forming a new institution, four in liquidation and three were not officially activated. In this way it was also possible to minimize the risk of self-selection of the sample which would have provided a sample that was not entirely representative of the studied universe. The validity of this representativeness was also confirmed by a subsequent statistical procedure, taking into consideration some context variables traditionally used by national and international literature on territorial cooperation and on polycentric territorial structures (ANCI, 2005; ESPON 2006): the type of territory in which each MU is present (mountainous/non-mountainous), and the average population and the number of municipalities of the MUs.

Survey and Interview questions

The first set of interviews had six sections regarding: respondent's background; the types of IMAs mainly used in the region; reasons why municipal actors chose whether and with whom to cooperate; characteristics of the MUs' boundaries; political activities of the MUs; the relations between the MUs and both the territory and the citizens. In each section, open-ended questions were asked, aimed to understand the support and technical advice municipal actors received from regional officers on crucial decisions occurred during the various steps of the cooperative process. The survey had six sections related to: respondent's background; reasons that encouraged partners to establish a MU; functions co-managed; MU's internal organizational characteristics; political organs' composition and their activity; relationship between the MU and the external environment. The second set of interviews followed the survey's sections. Rather than focusing on technical characteristics of the MUs, semi-structured and open-ended questions were asked to thoroughly investigate in each section the factors that influenced municipal agents in structuring their supra-municipal choices and the policy implications of these choices. As was done during the first set, at the end of each interview, informants were asked to share any other relevant information.

Secondary Sources and other data

Around 50 official reports published by national and regional organs on IMC in Italy were consulted. Relevant information was also gathered from internet websites of the regional bodies and the MUs. Data concerning CJM's compliance was elaborated starting from an existing dataset of the Italian Ministry for Economy and Finances (MEF). Previous academic researcher on the local government traditions in Italian regions were also consulted (among them: Putnam et al., 1994; Fargion et al., 2006; Vassallo, 2013).

5.2.3. Data Analysis

The analysis was guided by Eisenhardt's notion that «analyzing data is at the heart of building theory from case studies» (Eisenhardt 1989, 11). On the basis of the theoretical background previously introduced, and considering the aforementioned future challenges for the application of a second-generation rational choice approach to the empirical study of regional governance, three analytical goals were critical for the purpose of this article: i) to constructe an issue's history regarding all three dimensions under scrutiny aimed to identify the general trends of each region; ii) to explain them according to the ICA framework; iii) and, to understand the practical policy implications of these choices. To this purpose, a complete theme list coinciding with all the selected dimensions/sub-dimensions was elaborated (see Tables 2-3-4-5). Their data analysis procedure was based on a triangulation of all the primary and secondary qualitative data collected. This procedure allowed to check the validity of the study, and to carry out a preliminary test of the theoretical expectations of this article. A four step data analysis was conducted.

In the first step of data analysis, the official reports on IMC elaborated by the regional unit of ANCI and by the national organs were used contextually with the data on CJM

compliance. The aim was to identify the general characteristics of IMAs in the two regions. The preliminary results emerging from this desk analysis were then triangulated with the data collected during the first set of interviews. Each interview was coded onto the theme list. After completing this process, a complete overview of the type of IMAs mainly used, and a preliminary one for the other sub-dimensions were available.

The second step of data analysis was based on a descriptive statistical analysis of the dataset. Based on the web survey data and a following analysis of the website and the statutes of the two regions' MUs, the dataset contained technical data on the bodies. This data analysis allowed to reconstruct the presence of common trends in the two regions concerning all the three dimensions and relative sub-dimensions under investigation (limited to MUs).

Each of the 35 interviews were coded on the theme list during the third step of data analysis. After completing this process, it was able to provide extensive qualitative information about the factors that influence the structuring of supra-municipal choices, the reasons for choosing partners for creating IMAs and the implications of the supra-municipal choices for the management of the inter-municipal experience.

Considering the first three steps of data analysis, and according with the ICA framework, the aim of the fourth one was: i) to construct - for each of the three dimensions - a history about the presence of general trends in the two regions, and common explanations for them on the basis of the two theoretical expectations elaborated; ii) to understand the practical policy implications of these choices. ANCI representatives were consulted to validate the results once they were completed.

6. Data and findings

Results are presented in this section. Following the four step data analysis previously introduced, and on the basis of the theoretical background of this article, an issue history for each of the three dimensions will be presented, followed by a general description of the policy implications of the supra-municipal choices.

Strategic Dimension

The influence regional tools have in structuring municipal choices is confirmed through the analysis of the strategic dimension of the IMAs in Emilia-Romagna where the possible transaction costs municipalities may have while choosing both their associative instruments and their partners to reach a critical mass, are mitigated by the characteristics of the regional incentive system and the benefits it can offer. This is confirmed by both qualitative and quantitave data collected (see Table 2 for more details). In the web survey, for example, 95.5% of the interviewees agree that the characteristics of the regional system influenced the municipalities when choosing a MU for CJM implementation. It is not therefore surprising if among the CJM municipalities, there is a tendency to use MUs above all for managing multiple functions. Similarly, all interviewees in Emilia-Romagna pointed out that the financial and persuasive actions of the Region played a pivotal role when choosing partners for creating a MU: the characteristics of the regional incentive system were able to reduce the

transaction risks municipalities faced while selecting their cooperative partners.

Contrastly, the analysis of all the sub-dimensions of the IMC in Veneto shows that in the absence of a structured regional strategy, contextual factors concerning the administrative municipal traditions influence how IMAs are chosen and selected in a region. In the case of Veneto, it is the persistent administrative individualism of the Venetian municipalities that contribute to it, and it is largely tied to both organizational and cultural issues. Broadly speaking, convention is preferred in this region. For example, facing any structured action by the regional policy maker when choosing the type of IMA for CJM implementation, the Venetian municipalities tend to prefer conventions, with around 70% of municipalities that do not co-manage any basic function through a MU. Similarly, basic functions are mainly carried out through convention (94.6% of all Venetian municipalities) and consortia (81.9%), while MUs are only used by 16.8% of municipalities.

Structural Dimension

The role regional tools have in reducing contractual risks and providing high cooperative benefits is also confirmed by analysing the boundaries of these entities in both Emilia-Romagna and Veneto. In line with the first theoretical expectation originating from the ICA framework, in the former Region, for example, municipalities tend to create IMAs in order to respect the same dimensional profiles required by the funding regional criteria. By way of example, in 2016, more than two-thirds of the MUs were concurrent with an OTA, and half of them with a SSD. Moreover, most of the Emilia-Romagna MUs involve a large number of municipalities and high population. Unlike Veneto, where both "couples" and "only small" MUs prevail, as well as MUs that both count only two municipalities and with only a few inhabitants are being financed in this region. Conversely, because of the net value absence of a regional provision, in Veneto, the MUs that involve a large number of municipalities and inhabitants are present in the mountainous territory, that is the unique area of the Region in which IMAs with those characteristics have persisted since the last decade.

While also considering the MUs' internal organization, the expectations arising from the first theoretical proposition are confirmed when analysing the municipal functions transferred to the MUs. Data corresponds with characteristics of financial criteria present in the two regions. Contrarily, there are no differences in the number of functions managed entirely by the MU, as well as in the sub-dimensions related to the presence of a MU's own office, and their permanent staff. Emerging in the presentation of the regional case studies selected, neither regions provided regional tools for that aspect, nor previous municipal administrative traditions were present.

Governance Dimension

It is evident that policy traditions, if present, influence the way in which municipal actors structure their decisions only when any financial or persuasive action in this regard are absent, and this is also confirmed by way of analysing the governance dimension. It follows that while in Veneto all sub-dimensions are influenced by the previous administrative

legacies, the latter influence the vertical and the horizontal governance of the MUs present in Emilia-Romagna only when no financial or persuasive tool is provided.

Regarding the horizontal dimension, for example, the nature of the regional tools seem to only influence the number of formal meetings of political organs of the MUs in Emilia-Romagna. The greater frequency of the *giunte* meetings in this region, in fact, is directly influenced by the persuasion campaigns to reinforce the political dimension of these organizational bodies established during the Inter-Institutional Conference meetings on Territorial Integration. The municipal administrative traditions, instead, explain the greater use of motions within the Emilia-Romagna' MUs as compared to Veneto, since in the former regional context there had traditionally been a great involvement of institutional actors in the municipal strategic-management decisions.

The same reasons help in explaining the forms of vertical governance of the two regions' MUs. In Veneto, because of the net value absence of administrative traditions, participatory processes were initialized only in two MUs, as well as the use of forms of participation within the territory. The greater number of initialized participatory processes by the MUs in Emilia-Romagna, instead, resulted because of financing stipulated by the regional law 3/2010. Contrastly, because of the net value of any regional provision for the involvement of local stakeholders, the high use of these forms of participation in Emilia-Romagna is in line with the greater tradition of involvement of socio-economic actors historically prevalent among the municipalities of this region. As underlined by Yi et al. (2017, 4), in fact, the commitment to an agreement is made less risky for the participants when local actors experience more homogeous preferences to solve common problems, contextually with mutual trust and knowledege.

Policy Implications

According with Feiock (2007, 60), a better understanding of the regional governance context not only advances the theoretical understanding of ICA, but it also has pratical policy implications. The ICA framework, in fact, «can help us understand the strengths, possibilities, and limitations of self-organizing organizations and networks among local government units in ways that provide practical insights for policy design» (Feiock 2009, 372). While recognizing the importance of this, the study of the policy implications within the ICA framework had remained underresearched. It is therefore necessary to look into the practical insights of how municipal actors structure their associative choices based on how some contextual factors affect their networking experience.

Empirical research shows that while the policy tools provided by the upper level of government can immediately reduce the coordination costs, the tendency to align with regional preferences to receive high economic benefits can later negatively affect the networking experience. Considering the structural dimension, for example, the prevalent tendency of the MUs in Emilia-Romagna to achieve financial regional criteria for receiving high cooperative economic benefits created several internal organizational problems because MUs underwent continuous dimensional and organizational remodelling in these years to adapt their internal characteristics to the new regional funding criteria. These difficulties are

less evident in Veneto, where choices on whether and how to associate parts of municipal functions were more dependent on municipal administrative traditions.

This also explains the differences in institutional organization of the MUs in the two analysed regions. In fact, where IMAs are equipped with their own technical and political bodies they tend to have a higher degree of autonomy on the municipal level while IMC was brought about by the preferences homogeneity of the municipal actors. The analysis of the trends of MU's organization structure and their staff in the two regions are emblematic of this (see Table 3). Consequently, the absence of any type of financial provision in either region resulted in a higher autonomy in associative choices, and a higher organizational autonomy of the MUs as compared to the municipal level.

[Insert Table 6 Here]

7. Conclusions and Debate

Cooperation among fragmented municipalities for service delivery is a common practice in Europe that has been understudied from both a theoretical and an empirical point of view. This article has contributed to this debate by applying a second-generation rational choice approach to the study of European regional governance in the context of IMC, offering a transaction cost explanation for the choice among alternative interlocal agreements. Taking the Italian context as a case study, it also advances the ICA literature that seldom treated ICA as the unit of analysis when explaning the variations in interlocal agreements. To fill this lacuna, this article used different regional institutional contexts to empirically investigate both the simultaneous influence of two contextual factors in municipal actors' selections of agreement forms and their internal configurations, and the practical policy implications of these choices. It presents the first European study on a large number of IMAs, covering different aspects of the inter-municipal experience, and it empirically examined the influence different contextual factors have on them.

The results show that regional diffusion mechanisms and regional governance bodies play a crucial role in reducing contractual risks and information barriers for municipal actors when assessing the costs and benefits related to the choice of cooperative arrangements. They had a direct influence during all the phases of a cooperative process. Instead, the pre-existent networks of relationships among local agents and their municipal administrative traditions would be able to only influence the calculus of cooperative actors without a regionally structured incentive system and persuasive symbolic action present. These results help in understanding not only the strenghts and the possibilities of the ICA framework, but also the limitations of self-organizing networks among local government units. Looking at the policy implications of these choices, in fact, empirical research showed that a greater institutionalization of the networking experience is guaranteed only when the influence of the second regional context factor prevails. On the contrary, this institutionalization would only be short term in presence of municipal choices mostly oriented towards the achievement of benefits provided by the policy tools established by the regional government. In other terms, in showing that findings suggest that induced municipal cooperation to reach critical mass for

better competitiveness would be preferable only in the starting phases of a cooperative process, which in order to be institutionalized would require in particular, the presence of a homogeneity of intent and preferences on the part of the municipal actors involved.[5]

Considering that the use of the ICA theoretical stance appeared to be productive in providing a comprehensive outlook on research in the field of IMC, the next challenge in expanding the ICA framework in Europe could be to convert the two theoretical propositions into testable hypotheses in order to assess the level of intensity with which financial incentives, persuasion, and administrative traditions are able to influence the motivations of municipal actors in structuring their supra-municipal choices. Aiming to develop comparative studies in different European regions, moreover, the innovative dimensions (and relative sub-dimensions) that cover the entirety of the inter-municipal phenomenon elaborated can be adapted to other national contexts, in order to investigate individual characteristics of IMC in Europe and their relative contextual influencing factors.

[5] One of the aims of establishing interlocal agreements is to reach critical mass in order to mainly attract external financing and to better converse with the higher levels of government, and it emerges in both regional contexts examined. As an ANCI representative argued, in fact, «MUs are created for achieving greater political weight and have more possibilities to intercept European and national fundings. [...] It is therefore becoming a political issue: if you are together, you are more impactful and above all, you are able to influence some vast area policies. This is particularly true for small municipalities that alternatively would not be able to impose their own political influence on the territory».

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Table 1. Factors influencing IMC: Emilia-Romagna and Veneto compared

		Emilia-Romagna	Veneto
Strategy for municipal rescaling		• To reinforce supra-municipal governance through a widespread diffusion of MUs • MUs to improve efficiency	• To not contest the autonomy of the municipalities, that can choose the IMAs more appropriate to the local reality (through MUs, conventions, or consortia) • MUs to improve local development
Regional Tools	Financial Incentives	• Same criteria for regionalized national incentives and endogenous resources: o Financial incentives only for MUs that, at least: involve 10,000 inhabitants; aggregate 4 municipalities (or 3 with over 15,000 inhabitants); manage at least 3 basic functions, and the informative systems; are coincident with an OTA; ensure the integral transfer of the single associated function. o Additional incentives for MUs that: are coincident with a SSD; aggregate the largest number of municipalities; manage the largest number of functions	• Different criteria for regionalized national incentives and endogenous resources: o Regionalized national incentives: only for MUs (also, with only two municipalities and 5,000 inhabitants involved and two functions co-managed) o Endogenous resources: for MUs, conventions and consortia (also, with only two municipalities and 5,000 inhabitants involved and two functions co-managed)
	Persuasion Campaigns	• Present, structured, and well implemented	• Where present, not very structured and rarely implemented
Municipal Administrative Traditions		• Strong diffusion of IMAs (in the form of hard cooperation) • Strong diffusion of forms of participation between municipalities and other local actors for public service delivery • Strong involvement of institutional and socio-economic stakeholders in municipal decisions	• Low diffusion of IMAs (in the form of soft cooperation) • Poor inclination to involve stakeholders, citizens and other political actors in municipal decisions and in public service delivery

Table 2. Explaining the Strategic Dimension of IMC in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto: main trend(s) and explanation(s)

Dimension	Sub-Dimensions		Main Trend(s)		Explanation(s)	
			Emilia-Romagna	Veneto	Emilia-Romagna	Veneto
Strategic	Types of IMAs mainly used:	by all municipalities (basic functions)	Prevalence of MUs: • 70% of municipalities co-manage basic functions through a MU • 60% of municipalities co-manage non basic functions through a MU • for CJM implementation: 24.6% of municipalities co-manage 4 functions through a MU, where additionally 10% of municipalities co-manage only 3 functions - 45.5% of municipalities have not initialized a convention	Prevalence of conventions and consortia • 94.6% of municipalities co-manage basic functions through a convention, while 81.9% through a consortia • Only around 25% of the non-basic functions are co-managed (mainly through convention) • for CJM implementation: 14.7% of municipalities co-manage 1 function with a convention, 9.6% co-manage 2; 22.3% co-manage 3; 11.2% co-manage 4; and 4.8% co-manage all of them - conversely, 68.5% of municipalities do not co-manage any basic functions through a MU	Nature of the Regional tools (financial incentives and persuasion campaigns)	Municipal Administrative Traditions
		by all municipalities (non-basic functions)				
		for CJM implementation				
	Reasons for the choice of:	partners in creating a MU	Based on the criteria of the regional incentive system: • 90% of the interviewees agree that the regional financing system has influenced the municipalities when choosing partners for creating a MU • 95.5% of the interviewees agree that the characteristics of the regional system have influenced the municipalities when choosing a MU for CJM implementation	Based on the homogeneity of the preferences of the municipal actors; and antecedent inter-municipal collaborations: • 85% of the interviewees agree that territorial homogeneity influenced the municipalities when choosing partners for creating a MU • only the 15% of the interviewees agree that the characteristics of the regional system influenced the municipalities when choosing a MU for CJM implementation		
		the type of IMA for CJM implementation				

Table 3. Explaining the Structural Dimension of IMC in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto: main trend(s) and explanation(s)

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="2">Dimension</th><th colspan="2" rowspan="2">Sub-Dimensions</th><th colspan="2">Main Trend(s)</th><th colspan="2">Explanation(s)</th></tr>
<tr><th>Emilia-Romagna</th><th>Veneto</th><th>Emilia-Romagna</th><th>Veneto</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="6">Structural</td><td colspan="2">Number of municipalities involved</td><td>More than 8 municipalities involved, across all the region (31/44 MUs)</td><td>More than 8 municipalities in the mountain areas (7/19 MUs) & Two/Three municipalities in the other areas of the region (16/25 MUs)</td><td rowspan="3">Nature of the Regional tools (financial incentives and persuasion campaigns)</td><td rowspan="2">Municipal Administrative Traditions</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Number of inhabitants involved</td><td>More than 50,000 inhabitants involved, across all the region (32/44 MUs)</td><td>More than 30,000 inhabitants in the mountain areas (10/19 MUs) & less than 15,000 in the other areas of the region (23/25 MUs)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Type of IMAs</td><td>To be "Archipelago" (21/44 MUs) or "Satellite" (13/44 MUs)</td><td>To be "Couple" (9 MUs) or "Only Small" (13 MUs)</td><td>Nature of the Regional tools (financial incentives)</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Autonomy of the IMAs with respect to the associated municipalities of:</td><td>Their organization structure (presence of own office)</td><td>Only a third of the MUs had their own office</td><td>The quasi totality of the MUs had their own office</td><td colspan="2">Autonomy in associative choices (in absence of regional tools and municipal administrative traditions)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Their functions (integrality in co-management of functions)</td><td>With an average of 8 functions transferred to the MUs, all of them are entirely managed by the MUs</td><td>With an average of 2 functions transferred to the MUs, all of them are entirely managed by the MUs</td><td>Nature of the regional tools (financial incentives and persuasion campaigns)</td><td>Nature of the regional tools (financial incentives)</td></tr>
<tr><td>Their staff (percentage of permanent staff)</td><td>Less than one-third of the staff only works for the MU</td><td>More than two-thirds of the staff only works for the MU</td><td colspan="2">Autonomy in associative choices (in absence of regional tools and municipal administrative traditions)</td></tr>
</table>

Table 4. Explaining the Governance Dimension of IMC in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto: main trend(s) and explanation(s)

Dimension	Sub-Dimensions	Main Trend(s)		Explanation(s)	
		Emilia-Romagna	Veneto	Emilia-Romagna	Veneto
(Horizontal) Governance	Number of formal meetings of political organs (Councils and *giunte*)	Bimonthly for the Council - Biweekly for the for the *giunte*	Bimonthly for both the Council and the *giunte*	Nature of the regional tools (indirectly the financial incentives; and directly persuasion campaigns)	Municipal Administrative Traditions
	Use of motions	Medium use in the quasi totality of the MUs (around 5/6 motions each year, in previous 5 years)	Absent use in the quasi totality of the MUs (in previous 5 years)	Municipal Administrative Traditions	
(Vertical) Governance	Diffusion of forms of participatory democracy	Present in around a third of the MUs	Absent in the quasi totality of the MUs	Nature of the regional tools (financial incentives)	
	Diffusion of forms of involvement of local stakeholders	Present in around a third of the MUs	Absent in the quasi totality of the MUs	Municipal Administrative Traditions	

Table 5. Details on Data Sources

Dimension	Sub-Dimensions		Unit of Analysis	Sources				
				Archival Data	Quotes from In-depth Interviews (semi-structured and open-ended)		Web Survey Data Collection	MU's Website and Statutes Data Collection
					First Set of Interviews (with regional officials and ANCI representatives)	Second Set of Interviews (with municipal actors)		
				Around 50 official reports were consulted	*A total of 15 interviews were conducted, 8 of which regarding Emilia-Romagna and 7 regarding Veneto*	*A total of 35 interviews were conducted, 17 of which regarding Emilia-Romagna and 18 regarding Veneto*	*55 questionnaires were collected, 28 of which came from the Venetian MUs and 27 from the Emilia-Romagna MUs*	*Related to all the 44 Venetian and the 44 Emilia-Romagna MUs*
Strategic	Types of IMAs mainly used:	by all municipalities (basic functions)	IMAs	Official National Organs Reports - Regional Unit of ANCI Reports	15			
		by all municipalities (non-basic functions)			15			
		for CJM implementation		Official National Organs Reports - Dataset of the Ministry for Economy and Finances	15			
	Reasons for the choice of:	partners in creating a MU	MUs		15	35	47 (scaling question)	
		the type of IMA for CJM implementation	IMAs		15		45 (scaling question)	
Structural	Number of municipalities involved		MUs					88
	Number of inhabitants involved							88
	Type of IMAs							88
	Autonomy of the IMAs with respect to the associated municipalities of:	Their organization structure (presence of own office)	MUs			35	40 (closed question)	15
		Their functions (integrality in co-management of functions)				35	55 (closed question)	
		Their staff (percentage of permanent staff)				35	49 (closed question)	
Governance	Number of formal meetings of political organs (Councils and *giunte*)		MUs			35	53 (closed question)	
	Use of motions					35	53 (closed and open-ended questions)	
	Diffusion of forms of participatory democracy				15		52 (closed and open-ended questions)	
	Diffusion of forms of involvement of local stakeholders				15		52 (closed and open-ended questions)	

Table 6. Evidence for the Contextual Explanation(s)

Proposition	Exemplary Quotations	Policy implications	Exemplary Quotation
Proposition 1: If a well-structured regional strategy is present in terms of financial incentives and persuasion campaigns, the associative choices of the municipal actors tend to align with regional preferences because the potential benefits offered were enough to reduce potential transaction risks of cooperation	We have decided on the size of the body only for the economic financing ... not for the other [related to the strategic dimension in Emilia-Romagna] We fulfil all the requirements for those 3 or 4 functions related to financing [related to the structural dimension in Emilia-Romagna] Many have withdrew from the MU [...] due to a great deal of incompatibility between the administrators of large and small municipalities ... everything went well only to intercept regional contributions [related to the governance dimension in Emilia-Romagna]	Institutionalization of the networking experience is only short term in presence of municipal choices mostly oriented towards the achievement of benefits provided by the policy tools established by the regional policy maker	There is a total lack of organization within the municipal unions since every employee goes on their own [...] that is because there are [organizational] areas that have nothing to do with each other and that have been put there just to receive funding Within the municipal union, we do all things just to manage those functions related to regional funding [...] I'll give you an example: I set up the central purchasing body in a week because there were 40,000 Euros at stake and I wanted to take them [...] without having the technical tools and the suitable professional figures in the municipal union able to manage it Our MU has identical offices as the municipality where the same things are done ... for us there is very little difference ... even the relationships we have with the employees of the municipality ... there is not a clear distinction between municipalities and [municipal] union Let's say that everyone does their own business ... this is because there are areas that have nothing to do with each other, put there just to receive funding The municipal union is often considered as a superstructure
Proposition 2: In the absence of a well-structured regional strategy in terms of financial incentives and persuasion campaigns, the associative choices of the municipal actors are influenced by municipal administrative traditions, because the latter is able to offer them enough knowledge about their counterparts	Much more than directly determining the choice of who to associate with, territorial homogeneity facilitates this choice ... in fact the effectiveness is measured on the degree of trust ... the quality of people and politicians counts much more, so homogeneity in interest during the initial phase helps [related to the strategic dimension in Veneto] Convention has been chosen because it is simpler and it does not foresee the transfer of the municipal staff [related to the structural dimension in Veneto] Convention is preferred because in this region the mayors traditionally have a widespread fear of losing direct control over services [related to the governance dimension in Veneto] It happened because the real opposition takes place in the municipalities rather than in the municipal union, as was always the case for decades regarding similar issues in this region [related to the governance dimension in Veneto]	A greater institutionalization of the networking experience is guaranteed	In our area, it has always been thought that there should be a higher body outside the municipal ones with its own resources, staff and structures, to manage the problematic situations of these territories, which require ad hoc intervention measures I felt that among the colleagues there was a bit of concern at the beginning ... we hear about municipal unions that are created and then dissipate ... especially in other regions ... ours is a solid municipal union from the organizational point of view, and has been standing for many years. This was due to the great investment made by the political and administrative leaders of our municipalities, which had shared a common vision for many years, deriving from a common homogeneity of views matured over time, without external constraints of some kind It is unthinkable that the municipal union has the same location as one of the municipalities ... the idea of our administrators has always been that things either get better, or they don't ... there has always been uniformity of views from this point of view, among both the technicians and the politicians of this territory