The Double Policy Transfer.
Austerity Measures from Global Inputs to Local Outcomes across Mediterranean Countries.

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Abstract

Austerity programs have mainly been promoted by international bodies in a very detailed way suggesting, and even imposing, aims, strategies and policy instruments which are then implemented by national and subnational governments. As known, the most part of austerity measures had been designed and packaged by international agencies and regulators like the IMF and the OECD and refined by the ECB and the European Institutions. It deals with a list of measures submitted from prestigious and influential supranational stakeholders (consultants, opinion makers, representatives, chief executives, advisors) to the central governments in some cases through a coercive application and in other cases through a mimetic isomorphism. As a matter of fact, the most part of the central governments re-transferred the austerity measures to the Subnational Governments delegating the implementation again by a coercive or mimetic application. In other words, austerity measures have been transferred twice: from a political environment external to the state to an internal one and then from the central governments to the local ones.
This fact raises some questions about the players and the effects: who transferred and what has really been transferred through the double trajectory from global to national and from centre to periphery? According to recent publications about global discourse and local impacts, austerity transfer is interpreted as 'a global discourse that became a local practice' (Christensen, 2012). Actually, in the transfer process many changes occurred and influences by the central government as well as by the local ones are crucial. Local assemblage, translation and reshaping shed light on the significant critical drivers and stakeholders that contributed to transform an external importation to an internal construction.
The paper aims at describing the double transfer of austerity programs in six Mediterranean Countries by comparing the trajectories of adopting and transmitting goals, strategies and instruments from the global discourse to the local implementation. It investigates how austerity policies impacted local public services (health, social services, water and sanitation, waste management and local transportation) with special regard to the interplay between external and internal, on the one side, and central and local policy makers, on the other, who favoured or resisted, biased or re-interpreted the austerity policies by fiscal and financial measures, reorganizational processes and ideas.

(very preliminary draft, please don't quote for any reason)

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Introduction

Policy transfer usually concerns the transposition of a policy component (idea, toolkit or design) from one accredited and undisputable eminent 'recipe-maker' to some 'recipe-takers'. Recently, scholars focused also on the micro factors that favour transfer *among* recipe-takers (after accepting the initial external transfer) and on what type of drivers (actors and coalitions, ideational backgrounds, institutional profiles, contingencies) can really contribute to policy change. Concepts like political assemblage or translation are stressing the role of local drivers that favoured policy transfer thanks to specific and locally positioned elements illustrating in such a way the relevance of 'local intermediators'.

In this paper we allusively refer to the insight of a presumed 'double level' distinguishing between the external and the internal influence in the case of austerity programs. This reasoning may shed light on global policies when inputs are attractive, generic and standardized as recipes to be adopted from central governments and then transmitted towards local governments or independent agencies.

From our point of view, this kind of transfer is particularly topical in our times. Hence, there is an increasing trend in providing to central governments packaged programs, set of toolkits, best practices' patterns and standards to perform better or to cope with challenging policy problems. An example is provided from EU benchmarks or programs, of course, but also by standards, problems definition and solution provided by eminent think tanks, academics and supra national institutions. As such, we may observe the globalisation of many types or policies and how they are globalising and taking similar shape across countries through the adoption of similar definitions, designs or instruments. At the same time, we think upon the local versions and the differences due to specific drivers that sometimes impede or bias the original input, but at the same time endorse the outcome. We observe that in these cases policy transfer occurs also because of local factors that actually favour the adjustment of the external input to the internal contingencies, the institutional profiles and the political configurations. In sum, the transfer is accomplished *inside* the national/local environments that adopt, also by reshaping, the suggested globalised program. As a matter of fact, global policies take place at local level and generate local outcomes.

The paper summarizes evidence and reasoning coming from an ongoing analysis on Mediterranean Countries and their public services under the threat of the austerity measures seemingly 'totally imported' from external and prestigious recommenders. This work synthesizes approach and findings in an exploratory contribution about aims, logic and main evidence. All these are deriving from a subgroup of research, a spin-off on of the EU-COST project on Local Public Reforms in Europe (Lippi and Tsekos, *forthcoming*).

1. Austerity policies and their travelling feature

Austerity may be defined as «a form of voluntary deflation in which the economy adjusts through the reduction of wages, prices, and public spending to restore competitiveness» (Blyth, 2013).

They created a condition whereby policy making is now permanently addressed in light of a perpetual and self-reproducing financial, political and cognitive 'premise of weakness' that frames the representation and the decision making (Pierson, 2001). This condition is labelled the new politics of *debt management by consolidation* (Streeck, 2013:2), a transformation «in the direction of a State that is "leaner," less interventionist, and, in particular, less receptive to popular demands for redistribution than was the case for States of the post-war period» (ibid.).

Austerity is more than a concept; it is furthermore a package of measures to be implemented according to the international agreements and, regarding EU member states, supranational directives by the EU institutions (Pollitt, 2010). As a consequence, financial downsizing directly or indirectly pertains to a potential reduction of resources and rights in service provision. It involves service management and delivery (e.g. cuts in service provision, capital spending freeze, limits to service frequency, quality requirements, outlets and timing, etc.) as well as the institutional and organizational background (e.g. rescaling and upscaling of functions, central budget supervision, postponing procurement, transfer of costs to private capital and privatization, etc.) (Kickert et al., 2013). As a result, austerity also serves as a policy window for national decisions and an arena of political competitions with purely national significance, unrelated to external, supra national relevance.

The starting point is that austerity measures have been conceived 'for export'. This 'travelling characteristic' is connoted by their supra national recommenders. Their designs have been issued as global and really generic to encompass a broad range of situations, institutions and local regimes of policy making. This wide and intrinsic feature makes them ambiguous, stretched and at the same time flexible and attractive. The formulation of the policy is subsequently vague and ready for 'exportation' by indisputable policy advisors who figured out by wide definition but at the same time incisive and attractive, well ready for a prompt and coercive diffusion.

Many kinds of policy sectors originally aspiring to globalization have been configured in such a way, e.g. sustainability policy, climate policy. A similar case is provided from NPM policy. As known, NPM developed gradually during the Eighties and the Nineties beginning by several Anglo-Saxon countries such as the UK, the USA, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand that launched groundbreaking programs of administrative reform inspired by market principles and supported by academics and prestigious supra national institution (e.g. OECD) that encouraged the policy transfer across the world and provided aims and measures to be adopted by the States.

Global policy transfer and local assemblage for NPM

A first insight of such *travelling policies* is supplied by the NPM. According to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011: 9), the NPM is confusingly covering a very wide range of reforms in an equally broad spread of countries. Scholars like Hood (1991: 10–16) and Osborne and Gaebler (1992) advocated NPM was a "one-best-way" globally accepted and locally applied, promoted by influential think tanks and international organizations (OECD, the World Bank). People from NPM oriented Anglophone countries occupied key positions in the main international agencies that spread widely the word about NPM. Such agencies influenced not only the Anglo-Saxon countries where they received favorable acceptance, but, also, resistant administrations as France (Pollitt & Bouckaert 201:6- 13). Their reform formulae was fueled by the dogma that the public sector may be improved through the introduction of business concepts and techniques, such as discretionary top executives 'free to manage', disaggregation of monolithic organizational units, performance management including output controls and measurements, introduction of competition within the public sector, contracts instead of hierarchical relations, citizens as customers with possibilities of choice between alternative providers, and greater parsimony in the use of resources.

Despite the supposed international convergence towards NPM, evidence suggests that diversity and lack of homogeneity are the main characteristics of local NPM implementation: «the term NPM was coined because some generic label seemed to be needed for a general, though certainly not universal, shift in public management styles. The term was intended to cut across the particular language of individual projects or countries» (Hood, 1995:95). Ferlie and Geraghty (2005) claim two main NPMs at the international level: the hard Anglo-American model and soft version of both the Rechtstaat model (Germany and France) and the Nordic model based on decentralization, corporatism and consensus. Most scholars agree that the NPM model exhibits specific cultural and political features which do not suit certain countries such as France, Germany, as well as the Mediterranean states. Countries with strong Napoleonic traditions only adopted NPM solutions in restricted and selective cases. In Germany and in Italy some NPM-type reforms took place at the subnational level, while the Nation-State has never implemented NPM on a large scale. More specifically in the Mediterranean countries, whereas there have been some NPM components, they weren’t the main reform tool.

In contrast to the original concept of “mimetisme administrative”, that was mainly developed in France in the 1970s (Bugnicourt, 1973; Langrod, 1973) and looked at the "administrative imitation" as “a mechanical reproduction of attitudes”, the experience from the international diffusion of NPM shows that the transposition of administrative standards and practices in different contexts is not done mechanically but is actually filtered through the institutional traditions and the current administrative and socio-political interrelations. There is a kind of path dependence in “accepting” and adapting international reform trends within national contexts.

Austerity as global discourse and local practice

As NPM, also the varied and assorted range of so called austerity policies may be read as a case of global input to be transcribed in the national agendas. This is the starting point of this paper. Austerity programs have been invented at supra national level by eminent and prestigious agencies and opinion makers and it travelled across the world as a global discourse (Christensen, 2012) that took place at local level. As known, it deals with a global answer to a global economic crisis, but more interesting, the last one offered an extraordinary policy window to launch relevant programs of retrenchment as a universal, unique and indisputable strategy to cope with the economic decline.

In fact, after the 2008 crisis, Austerity became a global phenomenon extending from the USA to Australia and across the EU from the Mediterranean to the Baltic countries, with diverse intensity, severity and mixture. There is no common pattern of austerity policies across the world; rather, there are specific areas in which austerity took place in a different way and to a different extent. Nevertheless, there is a bulk of aims, strategies and instruments that can be recognized as common to all the national agendas and strictly deriving from ‘economic recipes’. Also the timing varied greatly. Some countries were forerunners, while others delayed their interventions according to their proactive or reactive attitude. The geography of austerity spread across the world influencing all countries more or less profoundly, but in particular the European ones, which were more engaged in welfare policies and Local Public Services (LPS) (Kitson et al., 2011). It triggered a mimetic isomorphism (following coercive measures imposed by supra national agencies) in adopting austerity measures that rapidly had an impact (or had to be implemented) at local level. There is abundant evidence that in the vast majority of cases instead of boosting competitiveness and development, these provisions shrank household income and thus reduced economic growth and increased unemployment. In addition, sharp drops in Gross Domestic Product in many cases caused a higher debt-to-GDP ratio, thereby increasing the debt burden.

As the financial crisis in 2008 mutated from a problem affecting private institutions to a problem of sovereign debt (in most cases partly because of the transfer of private debt to the public sector), it seemed necessary to adopt measures to tackle it, as well as involving international agencies and supranational institutions.

2. Austerity in Mediterranean Countries

The global financial crisis spread across the world and involved the European Union in particular. After 2010 it affected in particularly severe manner the Mediterranean countries (initially, the so-called PIGS: Portugal, Greece and - the non-Mediterranean- Ireland and at a later stage Spain, Cyprus and Italy as well), which were performing very badly financially mostly –with the exception of Ireland- because of their public indebtedness and their loss of economic competitiveness. The crisis in the 'Old Southern Four' (Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain) seemed more radical and more severe than in Ireland, beyond the economic significance of the public debt and the external deficit. Consequently, there ensued a stream of provisions to prevent their default (Verney, 2009). The bailouts of Greece, Ireland and Portugal took place in 2010, while Spain and Italy's bailout was in 2012 and that of Cyprus in 2013; but more stringent austerity measures generally spread across the Mediterranean area after 2010-2011. Accordingly, the sovereign debt crisis involved also other peripheral countries like Croatia while strong recommendations were made by the IMF also to EU candidates like Albania. In 2014 also hesitating governments, for instance France, decided to adopt severe measures to tackle the financial crisis with cutbacks and retrenchment. In other words, austerity measures became the mainstream prescriptions for all countries that were not performing well or were at (presumed) risk of default. In parallel, there was a potential divide in the Eurozone between the Northern countries and the Southern ones.

Fears regarding the political consequences of the crisis affecting the 'Old Southern Four' stressed the triggers of the crisis itself (Verney, 2009). On the other hand, there were fears of a contagion between the "old four" Eurozone member states and the other European countries, both Eurozone members and countries not part of the Eurozone or not yet EU member-states like Turkey and

Albania. The permanent public deficits, the inefficient and corrupt public sectors, the untrustworthy public accounting practices and the economies in recession of all the Mediterranean countries suggested that a chain reaction was likely. Here, the advent of Economic and Monetary Union stressed once again the 'Southern Question' existing on the Community's agenda since the 1990s (Hlepas, and Getimis, 2010; Moury and Freire, 2013; Di Mascio, Natalini, 2015). Austerity was thus manifest as a case of policy transfer from some geographical and institutional places to others.

All in all, we know that austerity is actually a kind of policy transfer. Specific provisions affected some EU countries. In some cases, it deals with coercive and cogent policy making. The so called Memoranda of Understanding were dictated by the European Central Bank and the IMF to central governments of Greece, Portugal and Cyprus. In other countries, like Spain or Italy, similar policies have been suggested and promoted to Central Governments through softer strategies: partially imposing financial standards and partially by moral persuasion (letters of recommendations). In both cases, austerity deals with a transfer of aims, design and instruments from abroad. The concerned central governments never imagined and planned any type of similar policies. They were compelled to adopt them, or in other cases (Italy) a mimetic isomorphism pushed the government to accomplish the supra national institution by obedience and the hope for a better treatment. In any case, the input is not homogeneous but there is a common ground of principles and measures that have been adopted across countries. Such a way, Austerity may be roughly intended as a same core of measures explicitly devoted to rescue the bad financial performance and the following economic crisis. More specifically, there is not any specific evidence about the effectiveness of these measures nor common outcomes. The policy transfer prominently affected the agenda of central governments but there is not agreement among scholars about outcomes. More interesting, also implementation varied and in all the mentioned countries central government accomplished the policy transfer also by reshaping or limiting or adjusting input to the context.

More in general, scholars put in evidence that the austerity policies have been adopted at central level, but then other relevant decisions concerned the Local authorities and, especially for unitary states, they have been implemented from sub national level of government (regions, Local Governments, Agencies). Local Governance consequently seemed the specific *loci* where austerity empirically took place. This insight has been raised by a recent study on the relation between fiscal austerity and local governance (Nunes Silva and Bucek, 2014). The editors have shown at the same time the globalising aim and the scattered and variable impact of fiscal retrenchment on local governance across the European countries. The aforementioned book is a precursor, because it highlights some recurrent features, like centralization, stricter regulation, the shift of competences and resources from the local to the central government, the introduction of budgetary supervision, and a move back from networking to hierarchy. All these impacts create strong disparities among countries according to the institutional profile and intergovernmental relations The main result was that the conception of austerity was probably the same, but its implementation at local level was differentiated and sometimes contradictory: “many responses to a similar overall external pressure” (id.264).

3. Austerity as Policy Transfer

The triggering remark in the above paragraphs is that austerity is a policy that moved across different countries in the light of an expected learning. Although there is not a common and univocal meaning for austerity, we know that there were many paths through which it ‘travelled’ from one or more ‘sources’ to some ‘recipients’. This is the core of the austerity policy making, it deals with the spreading of an agenda through many environments and level of governments producing heterogeneous (and sometimes unexpected) outcomes. Here we want to scrutinize the analytical toolkit so to understand this ‘repositioning’.

The concept of policy transfer overtook the above described mechanic and linear perspectives and seems well fitting to the case in question. According to the Dolowitz and Marsh’s definition (2000:3) «policy transfer is a process by which knowledge of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present) is used in the development of similar features in another». According to Wolman and Page (2002:480), policy transfer can encompass transfer of policy goals, concepts, instruments, design, techniques in a broad and inspired way. The transfer can pertain to ideas as well as to structures and it concerns the institutionalization of both in the recipient countries at different level of government. In a broader sense, policy transfer refers to generic inspiration and vague orientation in terms of *policy labels*, namely *symbolical umbrellas* applied to a range of policies reflecting ambiguous and loosely bundled ideas (i.e. privatization) (Mossberger and Wolman, 2003). The subject to be transferred can be very wide and ambiguous in its definition (e.g. smart cities, etc.) and variously detailed.

Dolowitz and Marsh pointed out the starting condition is an internal unsatisfactory status quo pushing the policy makers to look for improvements from abroad. The internal/external divide matters. Hence, policy transfer mainly concerns relations among States (one to one or one to many) or international think tanks (Stone, 2000). At subnational level, it affects federalist arrangement and the cross-level interactions between central government and Local Authorities.

In any case, policy transfer deals with an expected homogenization. This is the matter of supposed convergence. Bennett (1991) pointed out four patterns: (i) emulation (best practices to be imported), (ii) harmonization (the endogenous adaptation to external heterogeneous innovations), (iii) transnational communities networking (shared knowledge and brokering by policy entrepreneurs) and (iv) penetration (the passive compulsory acceptance from outside). It means that an isomorphic input doesn't automatically imply a similar outcome: failures, readjustments, betrayal as well as unsuccessfully implementation can occur in different phases. According to Dolowitz and Marsh (2012:346) there is a matter of policy cycle for promoting or resisting. For instance, penetration can be expected at the issue making, while harmonization or resistance may occur during the implementation.

For this reason, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996:346-348) categorize three type of policy transfer: (i) voluntary, (ii) direct coercive and (iii) indirect coercive. Voluntary transfer occurs whenever policy makers are in search for a new legitimacy or pursue a mimetic isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1981). Mimetic transfer is a specific quest for legitimacy by the national (or subnational) political system because it legitimized to copy by the democratic rules and procedures (Radaelli, 2000:27-29) –e.g. the case of Europeanisation.

Direct coercive transfer occurs whenever one government forces another. According to DiMaggio and Powell, it fits to coercive isomorphism: a supranational institution or a leader State is able to influence the national policy agenda of one or more States searching for compliance (again, the case of EU directives).

Finally, indirect coercive policy making concerns non-governmental agents (McCann and Ward, 2013:7), like foundations, think tanks, academics, group of interest and consultancies. One can glimpse a loose relation with the DiMaggio and Powell's concept of normative isomorphism. As stressed by Stone (2000), the policy transfer is here frequently induced and indirectly promoted by non-governmental actors in a more incisive and successful way than the national institutions.

This sheds some light on the distinction between a hard and a soft transfer (Stone, 2010:270; Benson and Jordan, 2011:371). The hard one refers to a tight, intentional and claimed transmitting through an institutionalized channel (act, claim, declaration, directive) imposing or asking for a compliance, also detailing what goals have to be pursued and which instruments have to adopted. The soft transfer concerns a more generic and loosely coupled transmission by some sources to some recipients in a more inductive, suggesting and attractive way by imitation or re-interpretation, local adaptation and reshaping. It is more attractive because of legitimacy and involves local re-elaboration and bottom up influence by the recipient (Stone, 1999).

Political assemblage is the concept used to depicts this local adaptation. It comes from geographical studies and concerns re-arranging, organizing, fitting together a policy mix of pre-existing elements combined with new ones generating hybridization. Policies are not «local constructions, neither are they entirely extra local impositions on a locality. Rather, policies and governance practices are gatherings, or relational assemblages of elements and resources – fixed and mobile pieces of expertise, regulation, institutional capacities – from close by and faraway» (McCann and Ward, 2013:8). As a consequence, «rules are always selected, interpreted and adapted. Agency is nullified by the institutional structure» and policy transfer goes beyond the mechanical dissemination toward a processual perspective (Radaelli, 2000:39).

In other words, policy transfer can be successful (or unsuccessful), but it doesn't consist of convergence/divergence alternative (Stone, 2000:49; 2004:548). More probably, it fits in the middle according top-down and bottom up adaptations (Stone, 2012:485). As a consequence, policy transfer it implies an 'indigenization' (Freeman, 2009; Stone, 2012:487) and *allomorphism* (instead of *isomorphism*): a global discourse pushing for homogeneity generating local reshaping and heterogeneity (Lippi, 2000).

3. Austerity transfer in five Mediterranean countries

Austerity programs for local governance in the Mediterranean countries have been adopted and implemented through external input and local processes. The external inputs derive from the same, or similar institutions (ECB, IMF, OECD) with similar contents (fiscal retrenchment and cutbacks, reorganization) but with different intensity and a varied combinations of suggested measures. Sometimes, the austerity measures were imposed by coercive isomorphism by severe measures and financial benchmarks, while in other cases measures have been suggested by suasion and indirect pressures pushing decision makers toward mimetic isomorphism. Analogously, the type of instrument has not been univocal, but one may observe policy mixes of a range of instruments according to specific contingencies and exigencies in each context. Finally, processes and dynamics have been filtered by the political climate, smoothed or emphasized by the institutional context and finally supported or opposed by local actors.

In this paragraph we provide a provisional account about 5 of 8 investigated countries[1] looking at three aspects. Three aspects are surveyed in this description: (i) type of external input (strategy, design and instruments); (ii) local processes and type of national/local actors favoring or disfavoring the austerity policy; (iii) the local coalition, interests, values that favour or reshape the initial program in a version suitable for that context.

Cyprus

Cyprus faced retrenchment and fiscal consolidation due to the adoption of the Memorandum of Understanding on Specific Policy Conditionality with the European Commission, ECB and IMF (Trojka) in March 2013[2]. The logic of Europeanization was the main driver for promoting a policy transfer of measures invented at supra national level and then assigned to central government. In this case, it refers to a coercive transfer related to the mechanism of Europeanization (Radaelli, 2000). The external input dictated fiscal consolidation and administrative reorganization. As a consequence, severe fiscal cutbacks to State grants affected the management and delivery of public service at local level. In addition, the re-centralisation of budgetary discretion in 2014 implied hiring freeze, compulsory repayment for those local government that borrowed loans by the government and a radical reorganization of the public sector. In other words, the attention of central government when adopting the MoU, was prominently focused on reducing local funding and improving local financial management securing efficiency gains.

In practice, this strategy became a radical way to downsize the local government expenditure in place of the corresponding public spending at the central state level. The adopted measures were mostly horizontal : across the board. This retrenchment affected all the public services and depressed the local capacity to manage and deliver services to citizens. The combination between the reduction of allocated state grants (up to 40%) and further reductions and measures, strongly weakened the local government. The massive spending cut was increasingly moved from the central state to the peripheral administrations without undermining the state. This strategy was a re-interpretation by the state politicians who blamed the local governments as 'bad performers'. Recentralization became the core idea of new regulation enacted in 2014 and 2015 that introduced new legal framework that enhanced the budgetary supervision of local government from the central

[1] Three countries are still missing: France, Albania and Croatia

[2] See agapiou, K., Kirlappos, A. and Philippou, Ph. (2018) Austerity Measures and Local Pubblic Services in Cyprus: Copying with Old and New Challenge and Reinforcing Continuities, in Lippi, A. and Tsekos, Th. (eds).

state by authorizing the Ministries of Interiors and Finance to assess proposed budgets and to reshape them when these are exceeded. All these measures were not in contrast with the program suggested by the supra national agencies, but in some way they have been overemphasized and partially biased by the implementers.

That means that central government took advantage from the MoU to favor re-centralisation and to gain degrees of freedom with respect of the local politicians in spite of the international provisions. This fact is due to the desire of central state politicians to gain legitimacy and to look for visibility. Such window generated a mixture that reinforced government control over local level and reduced the public services managed from sub national authorities. The 'new' re-shaped policies contributed to make the state leaner, in disfavor of other sub national institutions and the citizens. But, in general, austerity measures had a limited impact on the regulation of local level and on the institutional structure. The intergovernmental relations have not been altered, while the main impact was the strong increasing of central control. It reordered the room for manoeuvre for central and local government.

In other words, the policy transfer occurred because the central government found an attractive stake to reinforce a path dependence in center-periphery relations in favor of the center. The resulting asymmetry was a reinterpretation from state politicians and only indirectly induced from the international program. In other words, in the Cyprus case, the policy transfer took place thanks to a political reinterpretation of the starting innovative program in the light of the past, namely to reinforce the divide between the (bad performingcentral State and the local governments.

Greece

As known, the Greek case is an outstanding example for passive transfer[3]. The three Financial Assistance Agreements (2010, 2012 and 2015) and their corollary Adjustment Programs and technical MoUs, represented a clear statement for policy transfer: they contained conditionality regarding local administration. External players, i.e. the lenders and the Troika had a clearer plan that went beyond the general promotion of competition rules while they did not see the modernization of central and local administrations as a tool for reducing the public sector and boosting the market.

[3] See Tsekos, Th.; Hlepas, N. (2018) Greeek Municipalities before and during the austerity era: Imosed policies, Local resistances and Unsuccesful Reforms, in Lippi, A. and Tsekos, Th (eds.) fortcoming.

The external target was to immediately reduce public spending and create conditions to keep it low in the future so as not to re-raise the public debt. Austerity policies, further than reducing of public funds transferred to municipalities and imposing restrictive financial management, included staff reductions and a privatization program as well. The domestic political system also propelled a new wave of amalgamations through a special program titled "Kallikratis". During the bailout period financial pressures became the main tool for policy transfer.

The mechanism is really simple: funding of the indebted countries is accompanied with prerequisites of structural reforms (*conditionalities*) (Spanou 2016). Evaluation mechanisms and procedures are installed and implementation milestones are introduced, including the specific content of laws and deadlines for their vote by the parliament , the establishment of new agencies and control procedures etc. etc. The indebted country is thus forced to cope under the risk of lack of funds necessary for the payment of amortization and other urgent expenses.

As a result, the criteria defining cutback areas and guiding reforms are varied. Several of them derive directly from the urgency of substantive, immediate and sustainable reduction of public spending. Others are motivated by ideological maxims and priorities of the lenders. Finally, few are left to national and local bargaining, including powerful interests, both concentrated and dispersed, that put pressure on the government or even try to find communication channels towards the representatives of the lenders so to promote their preferred solutions, namely those limiting their losses.

Despite furious opposition a series of reforms (prominently in economic policy, but also in other sectors such as pensions, labor relations, higher education and public administration) were attempted. The whole political system seemed to crack into pieces, while paralyzing strikes, violent demonstrations and protest actions became part of the daily life. Opponents were claiming that fiscal autonomy, budgeting and fiscal management became the subject an "unprecedented centralization", of an up-scaling of decision-making at the level of central government that abolished political discretion of local authorities on their own budgets. These new centralist institutions and mechanisms would destroy Local Government. National Associations of Local Governments appealed in the High Administrative Court ("Council of the State")

Finally, the problem of old debts and even more of liabilities towards private suppliers, businessmen and freelancers represented a further stakeholder that opposed the reform. The call for "public intervention" that would protect businessmen and freelancers against unreliable and insolvent local governments became, of course, louder during the crisis. Therefore, uniform and centrally monitored fiscal management in local government was not short of influential supporters and even the wider public becomes increasingly critical towards local governments, as the sharp decline in public confidence towards municipalities and regions showed.

As a result, the reform didn't work and significant impact were not registered. The Greek case is one of resistance among recipe takers to transfer after a passive initial availability to implement an attractive recipe by supra national institutions. Resistances, strikes, widespread oppositions, not implementation or organizational resistances including strong coalitions against the transfer among firms, local authorities and social protest, demonstrated that the local contingency didn't favor the policy transfer. Consequently, the policy transfer was the combination of initial external pressures and passive acceptance, on the one side, and on the other, the resulting availability by subnational stakeholders to adopt only those reforms they can accept in spite of the view of the European and international agencies and the global public opinion.

Italy

Italy is a case of soft policy transmission with regard to austerity transfer[4]. The financial debt was less critical and dramatic with respect the other countries, but the slow economic development joined to the public debt pushed the international opinion makers to consider the Italian case as 'seriously ill' since the Nineties. As a consequence, austerity policy has been promotted by a technocratic coalition centred around the Bank of Italy (BDI) and its research department, that has been keen on promoting more rigorous, stability-oriented budgetary policies. Since early 1990s, when the combination of international currency market pressures (forcing Italy to pull out of the exchange rate mechanism - ERM) and the corruption scandals affecting the traditional parties, paved the way for the empowerment of technocrats in governments, and the emergence of a new ruling elite. The move towards EMU goes in the same direction, as the convergence criteria established in Maastricht weakened the (formerly dominant) domestic "public spending constituency".

From late 2010 onwards, European institutions and international observers repeatedly criticised the unsatisfactory performance of the Italian government. The situation worsened dramatically in the summer of 2011, under pressure from the financial markets. In August 2011, ECB President Trichet wrote a letter to Berlusconi's government, urging it to take due action. Although not explicitly

[4] See Citroni, G., Lippi, A. and Profeti S. (2018) In the shadow of austerity. Italian local public services and the politics of budget cuts, in Lippi, A. & Tsekos, Th. (eds.) fortcoming.

embedded in a formalized conditional aid program, the letter imposed a policy agenda on the Italian government, going as far as to indicate the specific actions to be implemented. Among a number of measures for economic growth and fiscal consolidation, the letter requested the large-scale privatization of local public services, stricter control over local expenditure, a strong commitment to abolish or consolidate certain intermediate layers of political administration and actions aimed at exploiting economies of scale in local public services. Similar recommendations had been made previously by the IMF during their annual meeting with the Italian government.

After the Berlusconi's resignations in November 2011, the new government led by Monti was an interim one entrusted with the task of dealing with the emergency. This purely technocratic government promoted a deep and harsh retrenchment of the public sector through across the board cutbacks and a general logic of 'to do less with less'. Some relevant measures strongly hindered many sectors (employment, retirement benefits, local government, public services in general) and additionally promoted a reorganization of some aspects of the public sector. In particular, the state focused on the abolition of the 2nd tier (provinces). Also in Italy the local government was targeted as bad performers and a significant part of the adopted measures dramatically reduced the financial autonomy as well as the degree of freedom in public service management and delivery.

The austerity policy in Italy consisted of a piecemeal and fragmented legislation that raised since 2008 and then intensified in 2012. After 2012 the centre left governments continued to enact austerity measures in the light of the EU commission addresses. This policy transfer included a very diversified and conspicuous range of measures that increasingly weakened the local government and mixed emulation and inspiration. The most relevant is the change in the Constitution based on the 'Golden Rules' (the Fiscal Compact) establishing the State's break-even budget. This provision was passed by the Italian Parliament in 2012 by virtue of a change in the Constitution (Article 81) approved by two-thirds of voters in both chambers. This change paved the way for a thorough program of cutbacks across various sectors, which hindered local government in general, and destabilized LPS in particular. At the same time, the coalition promoting austerity introduced some new elements absolutely not included in the transferred agenda. It concerns the emphasis on the reduction of the political representatives in the local bodies, and the aim to abolish the second tier. Both aspects were well debated in Italian politics as the so called cost of politics. It means that the austerity content was reinterpreted from a general concern about the public spending and efficiency measures in favour of fiscal consolidation to a more generic consensus driven approach against the politicians and in favour of their decrease, because expensive.

This strategy provided electoral success to the promoter, thee Prime Minister Renzi, and partially modified and altered the initial program. As such the austerity program was initially very faithful with respect to the original design, but there two elements that increasingly biased and reinterpreted it in the light of internal factors and national stakes. Firstly, the economic and political contingency in Italy and the opportunity to compete for election decisively influenced strategies by the parties and left room for technocrats. But, only the latter were ’real implementers’ of a given transfer of policy. On the contrary, the elected cabinets (composed by politicians) while continuing to promote austerity measures, abandoned a systematic strategy and favoured an incremental decision making to produce a lack of visibility in the eyes of public opinion and to introduce new elements that favour recentralization and more degree of freedom for politics. As such, the policy transfer took place twice: the first one thanks to a coalition of technocrats (academics, professionals, banks) that accomplished a strategy as systematic as possible ; the second one thanks to the stakes of the national political system and its strategies and opportunities. In both cases, the austerity weakened the local government and intensely favoured recentralization.

Portugal

As for Greece, also Portugal was one of the European Union countries most severely affected by the economic and financial crisis and experienced a hard pressure from supra national agencies to adopt a severe fiscal retrenchment[5]. The financial crisis of 2007 and the subsequent sovereign debt crises in Portugal put at the centre of a borrowing cost upward spiral. Given the ever-increasing borrowing costs and the plea to the European Union, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for financial support meant that Portugal would embark on a narrative of austerity, implementing wide-ranging fiscal consolidation measures to reduce public spending. Portuguese government reached out for assistance in the form of strengthened cooperation between the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the European Commission and the European Central Bank, dubbed the "Troika" in 2011. The bailout package was formally requested in April 2011, following the resignation of the Prime-minister after failing to win parliamentary confidence

[5] See Silva, P. & teles, F. (2018) The buggest loser? Local Public Services under austerity Measures in Portugal, in Lippi, A. & Tsekos, Th. (edss.) forthcoming.

vote for the fourth and most severe package of austerity measures put forward by the minority government in less than a year. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed on 17 May 2011. MoU envisaged two types of measures: those targeted at fiscal consolidation and those aimed at structural reforms. Fiscal consolidation measures aimed at reducing the deficit to meet the Maastricht criteria of 3 percent of GDP, through hiring and salary freezing, fiscal cutbacks, and reduction of expenditures both at central and subnational levels of government. Concerning structural reforms, the MoU presented a set of far-reaching reforms ranging from the need to increase transparency in public financial management, to modernize tax administration, increase the efficiency of the judiciary, and reduce unemployment insurance benefits. Portugal was also expected to "reorganize local government" administration.

As for other countries, the Portuguese central government assumed local government reforms as a priority, while "valuing proximity and the efficiency of local government management". Four streams of reforms developed the core of the Portuguese policy (*Green Paper* published in October 2011).

While assuming more responsibilities, local governments were not only deprived of financial transfers from the central government, but their fiscal and managerial autonomy were also curtailed. These reforms straightjacketed local governments that were obliged to react to budget cuts while struggling to find new ways of guaranteeing citizens' well-being in a context of a high demand of local public services. Overall, then, local governments were encouraged to do more with less resources and less autonomy. To some extent, it is safe to say that limited autonomy restrained the potential – and expected counter-cyclical – role of local government in welfare provision.

Local government reform was a highly salient political issue. Even though Portuguese public debt problems were not primarily driven by subnational authorities' indebtedness, political discourse often stressed that municipalities' debt was unmanageable, as a strategy to enhance public and political acceptance of the severe measures.

At the same time, the lines of accountability have been blurred. It is an unquestionable fact that the European financial crises provided the momentum required to implement strict measures. However, the external inputs left room for internal political dynamics – as was demonstrated by the room of manoeuvre of the Portuguese government with regards to the design of measures to assist municipalities in bad financial situations and regarding the territorial reforms. Yet, political parties used discursive *strategies* of *blame avoidance*, arguing that certain local government policies were externally imposed as a potential attempt to be hold less accountable for unpopular measures.

These two trends generated protests against the reforms affecting the trust of the people in the political system and in public services in particular. Indeed, the discourse over the excessive debt of Portuguese local government was reflected in the levels of citizens' trust in these institutions

Spain

Spain, as many other countries of the Mediterranean and Southern European area, underwent a severe economic crisis in recent years that affected these achievements[6]. This crisis – debt crisis, banking crisis, fiscal crisis, economic crisis, - impacted in the core of operation of the state and public administration. The measures to fight the economic effect of these processes affected all levels of government but had a particular effect at the local level.

The economic crisis began and, from that moment onwards, it started a wave of reforms pointing to the opposite direction, towards a retrenchment of municipal capacities and autonomy. All these reforms accorded to the general mainstream of suggested by the Trojka. It is a case of emulation and inspiration to prevent harsher and dramatic intervention by the ECB. This mimetic isomorphism was materialized mainly through three legal instruments: 1) an amendment of the Spanish Constitution 2011 to introduce the principle of financial stability and limit public budget deficits in all levels of government (e.g. Italy), 2) the 2012 Law on "Budgetary Stability and Financial Sustainability" and 3) the 2013 Law on "Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administration Act. The constitutional reform introduced a clause to guarantee the principle of financial stability and limit public budget deficits.

Coercive measures and compliance enforcement were established for levels of sub central government and public administration. In doing so, it devolved part of the budgeting authority and control to the central government to facilitate compliance with the fiscal consolidation. Following this strategy, central government blamed the Local authorities as the core of financial problem of the country. In fact, , Local Governments were not indebted nor represented the weakest point of the Spanish institutional system in the eyes of the international observers. Despite of the overall opinion, the central government interpreted the Austerity recipes provided by supra national

[6] See Navarro, C. and Pano Puey, E. (2018) The Spanish Local Government in the Eye of the Perfect Storm, in ippi, A. & Tsekos, Th. (eds.) forthcoming

agencies as explicitly oriented to Local Government and consequently perpetrated a specific strategy to retrench their spending capacity and their autonomy (in 2013 theLaw on "Rationalization and Sustainability of Local Administration" substantially altered many aspects of local autonomy).
As a consequence, central government recentralized some tasks from local governments to provincial and regional authorities (social services, health services and others). Secondly, it compelled municipalities to obtain prior authorization by supra-municipal (regional and central government) so to be able to develop action in those fields in which municipalities had been active due to their general capacity to 'complement' the activity of other tiers of government (education, housing, youth, culture, immigration, etc.). Thirdly, it eliminated the "general competence clause" of the Spanish decentralization model that granted local governments the possibility to complement the activity of other public administrations in matters of local importance. Fourthly, it fixed maximum amounts for the salaries of councillors and mayors, a field previously on the hands of the council. Finally, it limited autonomy of local government to choose the legal form of services' provision.

The overall policy also showed the resilience of local governments and their capacity to adapt and ensure one of its main values, the ability to respond to local concerns in the provision of local services. From the perspective of local autonomy, the crisis and the need for fiscal consolidation served as windows of opportunity for re-centralization tendencies which meant degradation of local autonomy. Part of this recentralization is inevitable, part has been ideological, implemented through the construction of a specific narrative

Some provisional findings

All things considered, the five works in progress highlight how the policy transfer took place in the different contexts due to specific conditions that conditioned in a different way the accomplishment of the transfer processes. According to the fact that the five countries experienced hard and soft policy transfer of austerity programs (hard for Greece and Portugal, more hard than soft for Cyprus, softer for Spain and Italy), different paths led to the implementation.

In the Greek case resistances to implement the external recipes, after a temporary and failing try to adopt them, showed that the national context was not ready for transfer nor approving the suggested recipes. The coalition against the policy transfer was more effective than the advocacy coalition in favour of it. The process was contradictory and conflicting but we put in evidence that in the Greek case austerity transfer occurred only due to external pressures (the risk of default) and conditionality through coercive influences than through local adaptations.

The Portuguese case showed a similar transfer, but without resistances. The central government accomplished the requested measures and harshly invested the local government as 'perfect victims' for the rescue of the country. The political climate and the diffused opinion to be 'bad performers' supported this strategy.

Differently, both in the Spanish and the Cypriot cases austerity programs displayed a window of opportunity for recentralization. Here, the focus moved from a strict financial definition to a political one affecting multilevel governance relations and the need for steering the Local Authorities and reducing their autonomy. This fact strengthened path dependencies and also gave the local governments an opportunity to be resilient and effective in spite of the reduced funds by the state.

The Italian case is similar, but more evident. Austerity policy was partially accomplished, like in Spain and Cyprus, but the overall rhetoric was increasingly reshaped in the name of political competition and strongly influenced by contingencies. The advocacy coalition of technocrats and that of politicians competed for defining austerity. The idea of austerity was adjusted in turn on the political climate and stretched to the specific conditions. As a result austerity provisions were piecemeal and incremental.

4. Provisional comments for further steps

There is not a common and shared path to react to crises. Accordingly, there is not also a common way to choose or to implement austerity measures. The way politicians adopt a campaign for fiscal retrenchment and how national or local stakeholders structure their choices and strategies are both variable (Posner and Bloendal, 2012:27). Fiscal crises may be interpreted as extraordinary windows for institutional change and readjustments in search for a paradigm shift far from the strict financial problem.

Governments are preferably induced to launch harsh reforms in time of crisis as a reaction to external shocks to get legitimacy (Peters, Pierre and Randma-Liiv, 2010). Consequently, a financial turmoil can influence the national and the local pattern of governance leaving room for downsizing and rescaling (Hlepas and Getimis, 2010). This critical juncture is not taken for granted nor predetermined, but it opens to local dynamics. Hence, democracy can variably be influenced and readjusted according to these pressures. The external shock can potentially shrink the democratic arrangement or modify the arrangement of services management and delivery. As stated by Posner and Bloendal (ibid.:20) «an exogenous event or "shock" bearing down on all actors of the system requires some kind of policy response. [It] helps us to control for endogeneity where political leaders already committed to proactive fiscal policy contrive crises to mobilize support for their pre-existing positions».

Shortly, exogenous dynamics triggered endogenous ones. Austerity policies are external shocks supported by international or supranational agencies, but they are managed at domestic level by the central governments and implemented by the subnational authorities. That leaves room for decisional phases at international, national and sub national loci: the austerity policies 'travel' from an 'external' source and then adopted to a different extent and combination by the States that impose or transmit them to the subnational authorities. Importation leaves room for internal restructuring.

The observed policy transfer however was neither mandatory or mechanical, nor uniform in all states. The particular conditions of each state, its institutional history, the political orientations and strategies of the governments during the period of reforms acted as filters determining the particular mixture of austerity that was finally adopted.

Comparable was also the further downward diffusion of austerity toward the local level. Here too there was not a single and unique way. The policy mix depended on the relationships between central, intermediate and local levels of government and on how they adapted policies so as to maximize their benefits. In some cases, the effects were even transferred directly from the international to the local level, mostly through the conditionality of the loan agreements.

In total we could thus argue that the diffusion of austerity took place through a double movement: the first one is the introduction of a general model that has been developed at the international level; the second one is the construction of its specific versions based on national and local particularities. Both refers for three ideal divides: the first divide is between external push and internal opportunities (to what extent austerity means an importation or an internal reshaping); the second one is between measures before and after the economic crisis (are austerity evolving under the influence of the financial crisis?); the third one concerns multilevel governance (is austerity a trigger for redistribution of power? e.g. recentralization, downsizing and downgrading of local autonomy). All three driving questions lead to an analysis on the imported or constructed nature of austerity in each context. One has to look at the specific national and local context so to collect evidence in order to test the above mentioned hypotheses.

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