

Mapping Professionalisation and Politicisation in European Local Government

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Introduction

Mouritzen and Svava based their widely used typology about the horizontal power relation in local government on the argument that ‘structural features of municipal government in any specific country reflect a balance or compromise among [...] three organizing principles: layman rule, political leadership, and professionalism’ (Mouritzen and Svava 2002: 50-51). The layman rule—that citizens elected for political office should be directly and intensively involved in decision-making (Mouritzen and Svava 2002: 51)—and the principle of political leadership are relatively easy to apply in comparative studies of local government. The same is not true for the analysis of professionalism at the local level. This is certainly due to the fact that ‘professionalism’ and professionalisation are understood differently in various contexts (countries). And not only that: it is also likely to be difficult to identify (and define) the actors in local government – or more specifically: in the municipal administration – for a country comparison who are expected to secure and enforce ‘professionalism’. It is therefore not surprising that such a comparative study is only available for the Nordic countries (see Hlynisdóttir et al. 2024), in which the local government systems do not differ much and in which the municipal chief executive officer also occupies a generally prominent position. And although Mouritzen and Svava made it easy to define for the U.Di.T.E. leadership survey the chief executive officers (or CEOs) from whom they expect to achieve ‘professionalism’ in municipal administration – namely as the ‘highest [ranking] appointed administrator’ (Mouritzen and Svava 2002: 8-9) – it is not easy to identify them in all countries.¹

Comparative research on professionalisation in local government remains challenging. The literature is fragmented and difficult to generalise, mainly because no common framework exists to structure findings. Traditional comparative approaches on local government administration (see, for example, Hesse 1991; Hesse and Sharpe 1991; Page 1991; Norton 1994; Kuhlmann et al. 2025; Kuhlmann et al. 2024; Kuhlmann et al. 2022; Kuhlmann and Wollmann 2014) often focus on formal structures or legal frameworks, but these alone cannot capture the nuanced realities of the functioning of local bureaucracies in practice across diverse contexts. There is a need for innovative perspectives that go beyond structural typologies to consider ideas, discourse, and agency within local institutional settings (Teles 2022).

In a local governance context, professionalisation is not merely a function of formal credentials or technical training; it is deeply rooted in the internalisation of normative values and the influence of public debates as well as peer networks that shape administrators’ self-conception as public service

professionals. In response, this paper proposes a combined approach resulting from structural and legal charting of European local administration with a discursive-institutionalist approach (Schmidt 2008; Schmidt 2010) to mapping the professionalisation and politicisation of local civil services – and in particular the highest-ranking administrator at the municipal level – across Europe. This should offer a dynamic lens to examine how ideas and narratives shape institutional behaviour and change. Applying this approach to local civil service systems allows us to move past static classifications and explore how local administrative actors themselves perceive and enact their roles. Such an approach can illuminate the interplay between professionalisation (the development of a merit-based, expert bureaucratic ethos) and politicisation (the influence of political considerations on administrative roles), as well as the degree of autonomy local officials enjoy. By comparatively mapping discourses about professionalisation of local government with the practice of professionalisation at this level of government, we aim to address current research gaps and provide a richer understanding of variation in European local governance. This mapping is based on contribution of partners from various countries involved since years in surveys of local political actors.² This study's originality lies in combining an interpretive, ideational framework with empirical cross-national mapping, thereby offering both theoretical and methodological contributions to the field of comparative public administration.

Local Government Administration in Europe

Across Europe, local government administration is carried out by a professional bureaucracy that operates under the leadership of elected councils and mayors. At the apex of this administrative machinery are top-level non-elected public servants – officials such as chief executives, city managers, general directors, or departmental heads – who are appointed rather than elected. These individuals occupy the highest managerial positions in municipalities and oversee day-to-day operations of local authorities.

Local government systems vary widely by country, falling into various models – according to Mouritzen and Svava (2002) they can be captured as the strong-mayor, the collective, the committee-leader, and the council–manager form. In strong-mayor form (e.g. parts of Southern Europe), political leaders (mayors) have dominant executive authority, and the space for independent professional management is more limited. By contrast, in council–manager form (seen in the Northern European contexts), the top administrator (CEO/manager) holds significant managerial responsibilities and authority, operating with greater autonomy from political leaders. Despite these structural differences, virtually all European local governments entrust senior non-elected officials with implementing policies and running services. Indeed, the European Charter of Local Self-Government explicitly urges (in Article 6, Paragraph 2) that local government employees be recruited and managed on the basis of merit and competence, underlining the pan-European commitment to a professional, high-quality local civil service.

Top-level non-elected officials in municipalities serve as the administrative cornerstone of local governance. They are typically charged with executive leadership of the local authority's bureaucracy – directing municipal departments, managing budgets and staff, and ensuring that services are delivered effectively to the community. As the highest-ranking administrators, they coordinate and supervise the work of departmental directors and public employees, to implement the policy decisions made by elected bodies. They can also serve as the main technical advisors to local politicians, providing expert input and analysis to inform policy choices and to ensure that decisions are administratively feasible.

Senior public servants occupy the nexus of politics and administration. They are expected to act neutrally as career officials, yet they work in a highly political environment and in close interaction with elected leaders. This gives them a distinctive position as boundary spanners between the political leadership and the bureaucracy, mediating between both spheres, translating political priorities into administrative action and, conversely, reporting administrative results and constraints back to the political representatives. This position means top administrators must constantly negotiate the political-administrative boundary: maintaining professional objectivity and adherence to the law and best practices, while being responsive to the agenda of the elected council. How this balance is struck can differ by country and even by municipality. In some systems, the top official is closely monitored or even directly appointed by the mayor (blurring a political-administrative divide), whereas in others they enjoy protected civil-service status and operate with a high degree of professional autonomy.

While the institutional role of top-level local administrators is well established, in recent decades they have faced a host of contemporary challenges that complicate their work and have become focal points for both practitioners and scholars. A central challenge involves navigating the political-administrative interface under evolving conditions. Waves of managerial reform have significantly altered the context in which local chief officials operate. Since the 1980s, doctrines of managerialism and New Public Management (NPM) have swept through public administrations in Europe, aiming to make government more results-oriented and businesslike. At the local level, this translated into reforms like devolving greater managerial authority to CEOs, introducing performance measurement and strategic planning, and emphasizing efficiency and customer-oriented service in municipal operations. These changes in many cases enhanced the role of top administrators by casting them as 'city managers' or strategic executives. Moreover, the reform era often came with new accountability frameworks – top officials are now held to clear performance targets and are subjected to evaluation by audit agencies, benchmarking exercises, and citizen scrutiny in ways that traditional bureaucrats were not. While these managerial reforms aimed to professionalise local administration (making it more competent and output-focused), they sometimes also contributed to tensions. For example, empowering managers could lead to clashes with elected officials over who sets policy objectives versus who manages policy implementation. In some cases, strong executive mayors were introduced in tandem with managerial reforms, which re-politicized certain decisions (concentrating more power in the mayor's office) even as day-to-day management was streamlined.

Another pressing challenge is the issue of capacity constraints in local government administration. Many local authorities, especially smaller municipalities or those facing fiscal stress, struggle with limited administrative capacity even as the expectations placed on them grow. Austerity measures and budget cuts in the aftermath of economic crises (such as the 2008 financial crisis) have forced local governments across Europe to ‘do more with less’, often meaning leaner staffs and tighter resources for administrative functions. Top managers find themselves having to maintain service quality and implement new policies despite hiring freezes, funding shortfalls, or outdated infrastructure. This can stretch the capacity of even the most skilled administrators. Additionally, the scope of local government responsibilities has expanded in many countries – local authorities are now on the frontline of complex issues like climate change mitigation and adaptation, refugee integration, and pandemic response, which demand specialized expertise and intergovernmental coordination (Teles, 2023). Keeping up with these complex mandates requires building new capacities that some local administrations lack.

Finally, contemporary governance trends require senior local administrators to adapt to new modes of working. The rise of participatory governance means they must engage more with citizens and civil society, managing processes of co-production and consultation that can complicate decision-making (see, for instance, the articles in Teles et al. 2021 and Egner et al. 2022). The growth of networks and partnerships means today’s local government managers frequently collaborate with a range of actors, extending their influence beyond the town hall but also requiring diplomatic and coordination skills. Multi-level governance in the EU context also places local administrators in between EU/national regulations and local needs, as they implement supranational policies (for instance, EU funding programs or environmental directives) on the ground. All these developments make the role more dynamic – and arguably more demanding – than ever.

In summary, top-level non-elected public servants are indispensable pillars of local governance. They carry out the essential functions that turn democratic decisions into concrete outcomes, and they uphold continuity and expertise within the public sector. At the same time, they operate in a grey zone between politics and administration, where their effectiveness is shaped by how well professional norms and political expectations are balanced. This dual character makes them particularly important to examine in the context of local government.

Theoretical Framework

Unlike older institutionalist paradigms, neo-institutionalism views institutions not merely as formal rules or ‘organizational fields’, but as interactive constructs with continuously reproduced ‘meaning systems’ (Scott 1994). The importance of communicative interactions – discourses – for these reproduction processes is in particular emphasised by the ‘discursive institutionalism as the fourth “New Institutionalism”’ (Schmidt 2010). In Vivien Schmidt’s formulation, “discourse is the interactive process of conveying ideas”.

Such communicative processes can generate *ideational power*, defined as ‘the capacity of actors to influence others’ normative and cognitive beliefs through ideas’ (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016: 320). Ideational power is distinguished (by Carstensen and Schmidt 2016: 323) in three types:

‘First, [...] ideational power occurs when actors have a capacity to persuade other actors of the cognitive validity and/or normative value of their worldview through the use of ideational elements (power *through* ideas). Second, ideational power is manifested as a capacity of actors to control and dominate the meaning of ideas, either directly by imposing their ideas or indirectly through shaming opponents into conformity or resisting alternative interpretations (power *over* ideas). [...] Third, and finally, ideational power shows itself when certain ideas enjoy authority in structuring thought or institutionalizing certain ideas at the expense of other ideas (power *in* ideas).’

These three types of ideational power should be taken into account when empirically investigating why either politicisation or professionalisation and autonomy of top municipal administrators (see the next section on these three dimensions of the intended study) are dominant in a certain country.

Furthermore, it is emphasised by proponents of discursive institutionalism that discourse ‘comes in two forms: the coordinative discourse among policy actors and the communicative discourse between political actors and the public’ (Schmidt 2008: 305). Coordinative discourse refers to the generation, deliberation, and agreement on policies among insiders – for example, discussions among local councillors, mayors, and top civil servants on how to ensure professionalisation in a municipal administration. Communicative discourse, by contrast, is the outward-facing conversation in which political and administrative actors explain, justify, and legitimize decision agreed among them to the broader public or stakeholders. In a local government context, coordinative discourse might occur in strategy meetings behind closed doors – e.g. a city manager and department heads negotiating budget priorities or councillors, the mayor and high-ranking bureaucrats agreed on a job advertisement for the position of department head and, therefore, on the professional profile required for this position. Whereas communicative discourse plays out in town hall forums, press releases, or public consultations where those decisions are framed for citizens. Distinguishing these two levels of discourse is crucial for analysing how local reforms and administrative practices are formulated internally and how they are presented and justified externally.

However, coordinative discourse and communicative discourse do not only take place at the local level. They can happen at different vertically layered levels and influence each other from top to bottom as well as from bottom to top. And at any territorial level, for example, local cross-cutting discourses may collide as well as interact with sector-specific ‘discourse coalition’ (Hayer 1993) encountered in these sectors (or policies).³ Such discourse coalitions can be found at the local level, for example, among actors who insist that the professionalisation of urban planning is crucial for local development – even though the professionalisation of local government does not otherwise play a role in local debates. And they may even succeed in doing so.

Such discourse coalitions (typically in the form of professional associations) can also spread successfully across territorial levels and thus have a decisive influence on whether and which standards of professionalisation are considered appropriate in a particular sector (policy).

To enrich this view, we integrate insights from the sociology of professions and role theory. The sociology of professions alerts us to the way groups develop distinct identities, norms, and claims to authority. Local civil servants often strive to be seen as professionals with specialised expertise and ethical commitments, however, public administration has an ambivalent professional status. For instance, one study of municipal managers notes that local government management lacks some traditional hallmarks of established professions (such as mandatory specialised training or a formal monopoly over entry) even as managers exhibit strong professional ideals (McCabe et al. 2016). Survey data have shown that city managers tend to share a professional identity defined by beliefs in public service ethos, membership in professional associations, commitment to self-regulation, and a sense of calling – though interestingly, their desire for *autonomy* in decision-making may not be as uniformly strong (idem). This finding illustrates how professionalisation in a local governance context is not merely about formal credentials, but about internalised values and peer networks that shape administrators' self-conception as public service professionals.

Role theory further complements our framework by emphasising that individuals occupy multiple roles and face potential conflicts among them (Anglin et al. 2022). A local civil servant is simultaneously an expert administrator, a public servant, and a subordinate to elected officials – roles that carry distinct expectations. Classic role theory reminds us that people navigate these expectations by prioritising, segmenting, or blending roles, often guided by prevailing discourses about 'what one's role should be.'

In the local government arena, discursive institutionalism helps uncover these narratives. For example, a municipal department head may hear a coordinative discourse among peers that emphasizes technocratic excellence and impartial implementation of policy (reinforcing her professional role), while the communicative discourse from elected leaders highlights responsiveness to the mayor's electoral mandate (reinforcing a political loyalty role). If the mayor pressures the department head to hire a politically connected candidate over a merit-based selection, it can create a role conflict between professional norm of impartiality and the political imperative of responsiveness. How this tension is resolved – perhaps by invoking a discourse of professional ethics to push back, or conversely by accepting the political directive as legitimate – will depend on the strength of institutionalized ideas. By analysing such narratives and justifications, we can understand how the boundaries between 'administrator' and 'political agent' are negotiated in practice.

In sum, our theoretical framework marries discursive institutionalism's focus on ideas (coordinative vs. communicative discourses) and an interpretative approach focussed on actors how form discourse coalitions around shared ideas with the sociology of professions and role theory, enabling us to examine how local officials construe their identity and duties amid pressures of professional standards and

political demands. Taken together, these perspectives allow us to capture not only the institutional rules that shape local administration, but also the ideas, professional identities, and role conflicts through which top officials navigate the political-administrative boundary. This integrated approach is well-suited to uncovering the ideational underpinnings of professionalisation and politicisation in local administrations across different European institutional contexts.

Analytical Dimensions

To map variation in European local government administration, we focus on three interrelated dimensions: politicisation, professionalisation, and autonomy of top municipal officials. Each dimension is conceptualised with specific sub-dimensions and can manifest differently across settings. Below, we elaborate each dimension, providing examples from various countries and discussing how these traits might be empirically observed.

First of all, it has to be emphasised that *the understanding of politicisation can differ*. Politicisation can be seen as positive in a democratic political system in the sense that it makes socially relevant issues subject to democratic self-determination by those affected by these issues (or those who feel affected by these issues). Furthermore, it can be seen as a task of political actors acting (including leading civil servants/municipal chief administrative officers) to conscientiously subject socially relevant issues to democratic self-determination and so to politicise them.

However, in the context of the planned study the term politicisation implies implicitly something negative – namely, something that harms common goods. Such an understanding of politicisation can be well captured by what Anthony Downs emphasised in his book on ‘An Economic Theory of Democracy’ (New York: Harper 1957): Rational political actors – in our case parties or other interest groups in the council – are self-interested in gaining or maintaining power, and the more their self-interest in gaining or maintaining power prevails the more local government is *politicised*.

To complement that perspective, it is useful to recall the definition of politicisation developed in public administration research, especially by Peters and Pierre (2004). They describe politicisation as the substitution of merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining members of the public service by political criteria. In short: ‘politicization [...] implies attempts to control policy and implementation, rather than just supply jobs to party members or members of a family or clique’ (Peters and Pierre 2004: 2).⁴ This formulation highlights how political logics can penetrate the administrative sphere and distort professional norms.

Taken together, these approaches allow to keep both dimensions of politicisation in view: politicisation as a constitutive element of democratic politics, and politicisation as a potential distortion of administrative neutrality and professionalisation. This duality might help to clarify the framework of the planned study and sharpen the comparative scope of the intended project. Furthermore, we will deliberately refer to politicisation when the second meaning is referred to.

To clarify the concept of politicisation for the planned study further, the following can be helpful. One key sub-dimension is *personnel politicisation* – for instance, whether top municipal officials are appointed based on party affiliation or loyalty to elected leaders rather than on professional merit. Some European systems exhibit high formal politicisation: for example, in certain countries new mayors have the legal authority to replace senior administrators or municipal chief administrative officers at the start of their term, allowing political loyalists to be installed in the bureaucracy. In contrast, other countries insulate local civil service positions from political turnover – as seen in systems where a professional city manager is hired through a non-partisan process and enjoys tenure beyond electoral cycles. A second sub-dimension is *process politicisation*, indicating the extent to which day-to-day administrative decisions are influenced by political motives. This could involve informal pressures on civil servants to favour ruling-party constituents in service delivery, or directives to align regulatory enforcement with the mayor's political agenda. A highly politicised environment might be one where local administrators routinely anticipate and align with politicians' preferences (sometimes even without explicit orders), whereas a less politicised setting expects administrators to apply rules neutrally and speak 'truth to power' when advising elected officials.

Empirically, politicisation can be observed through both institutional indicators and perception measures. Institutional clues include legal frameworks on hiring/firing (e.g. presence of merit exams, civil service commissions, or conversely, provisions for political appointments) and documented practices such as frequency of turnover in administrative staff after elections. For example, if a country's municipal law permits mayors to hand-pick the chief administrative officer and replace them at will, that suggests structural politicisation. On the other hand, survey data (which have to be collected) can reveal the lived experience of politicisation: local civil servants might be asked whether they agree that 'promotions in my organization depend on political connections' or how often they feel pressured by elected officials in their work. By combining such evidence, we can map which local government systems lean more toward the politicised end of the spectrum (administrations acting as extensions of political parties or elected officials) versus those upholding a clearer political-administrative separation.

Professionalisation can also have different meanings. One negative meaning, which does not correspond to the term we are using, would be the social closure of political decision-making processes through professionalisation. In an extreme case, such a closure of political decision-making can lead to the rule of technocrats (Scott/Faulkner 1984).

For clarifying the notion of professionalisation to be used in the planned study we start – as already mentioned above – from the sociology of professions and in particular from a perspective inspired by systems theory. According to Talcott Parsons, professions exist and arise from a consensus of values leading to specific activities for solving particular problems. More precisely, Niklas Luhmann (see Kurtz 2011) saw the development of professions linked to the formation of functional systems in modern societies, i.e. to the functional differentiation characterising modern societies. These systems

are formed along particular dualisms (healthy/sick, socially appropriate ['just']/socially inappropriate ['unjust'], environmentally sustainable/environmentally unsustainable). Unlike other systems (such as the economy or the political system) these dualisms forming professionalised functional systems have no yardstick for success, such as money (wealth) in economics or power in politics. Therefore, the positive side of the dualisms in professionalised functional systems, such as the healthcare system, the science system or planning, must be developed internally on a (system-specific) professional basis. Although, the sociology of professions perspective on local government administrators makes it clear that these 'professionals' are not characterised by the same institutional closure as doctors or lawyers (they often lack a legal monopoly over who can practice and may not require a strict licensure), nevertheless, studies indicate they *do* share core identity traits (Gleeson and Knights 2006; Evetts 2009; Noordegraaf 2007).

However, this perspective on professions inspired by systems theory has its limits because professionalised functional systems are seen as closed systems. Therefore, and this is crucial for the concept of professionalisation of local government, 'boundary spanners' (Tushman 1977) are needed, i.e. actors who exchange professional knowledge (expertise) crosses the boundaries of functional systems or even translate the language of the various professions for others and convey the values and meanings professions share.⁵

However, in the political system – including its local level – it is not only important that boundary spanners perform this function with regard to professionalised functional systems. In this context, it is much more important that boundary spanners transmit the knowledge (expertise), language and meaning systems of professionalised functional systems to politicians in such a way that the latter can take them into account in political decisions. In this regard, boundary spanners must consider what is seen as desirable and feasible for politicians in a given situation.

It should be clear by now that the concept of professionalisation we propose is associated with the function of boundary spanners – and those who perform this function in the local government systems of the countries covered should therefore also be surveyed. Professionalisation of local government refers in this sense to what Helmut Willke (1995) had called 'Optionenpolitik'. This means laying out options for political decisions and their possible (even unintended) effects to enable (professionally) informed and reasonable decision-making. Ultimately, it is up to political decision-makers to take professional expertise and viewpoints into account.

Professionalisation in a general sense

Professionalisation of local government captures in a general sense the extent to which a local civil service cultivates a professional identity, expertise, and merit-based norms akin to a true profession. The concept intersects with broader theoretical frameworks such as Weberian bureaucracy, institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), and the tension between professionalism and managerialism in public sector reforms (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017), offering a multidimensional lens

to assess capacity and integrity in local governance. Its sub-dimensions include *meritocratic recruitment and career development, specialized training/education, and presence of professional norms and networks*. At its core, professionalisation means that working in local administration is ‘more than just a job’ – it is seen as a career with its own standards of excellence and ethical commitments. In practical terms, a professionalised local bureaucracy is one where entry positions require relevant qualifications (e.g. degrees in public administration, law, urban planning), hiring is by competitive examination or transparent selection panels, and promotions are based on performance and credentials rather than patronage. It also implies ongoing skill development (through training programs or continuous education) and possibly certification processes. (For an overview about the training of local public servants in general and about their training in various countries see CNFPT 2020).⁶ Furthermore, professionalisation involves the development of norms such as political neutrality, commitment to serving the public interest, and adherence to a code of conduct. Many European countries have professional associations for local government officers – for example, national associations of city managers or municipal chief executives – which foster peer networks and codify standards, reinforcing professional identity.

Empirically assessing professionalisation involves looking at both formal structures and cultural attitudes. Formal indicators include the existence of merit-based civil service laws covering local staff, requirements for educational credentials or professional certification, and institutionalized training (such as mandatory courses for municipal administrators). We might also examine whether there are robust professional organisations or accreditation systems for local officials. Culturally, surveys or interviews can gauge administrators’ self-perception and values. By mapping these aspects, we capture how far local administrations have evolved toward being professional bureaucracies as opposed to informal, politicised staffs.

Autonomy of top officials and the local civil service in general

A certain degree of autonomy of *top officials* in the context of local government is crucial for fulfilling the above outlined function of boundary spanners. Without it they can neither effectively transmit the knowledge (expertise), language and meaning systems of professionalised functional systems to politicians nor can they freely lay out policy options, including potential unintended effects, to enable professionally informed decision-making.

However, also the local *civil service* itself can only operate effectively without extensive external political meddling. This overlaps with politicisation, but from a different angle: an autonomous local bureaucracy is one where professional administrators have a zone of discretion to apply their expertise and judgement. This autonomy has multiple facets. We can think of this in terms of *operational autonomy* (freedom to manage internal operations, budgets, and personnel by professional standards) and *decision autonomy* (freedom to advise on or even decide policy details based on technical considerations, rather than being micromanaged). For instance, a local planning department with high

autonomy would be able to enforce land-use regulations uniformly and make technical decisions on permit approvals, insulated from politicians intervening on behalf of cronies. Conversely, low autonomy might be evident if every significant administrative decision requires sign-off by a mayor or if civil servants feel they must consult political superiors on routine matters for fear of overstepping. Additionally, *personal autonomy* for individual civil servants – their ability to act according to their professional judgement and ethical standards – is part of this picture. Do local officials feel empowered to ‘speak truth to power’ and provide honest expert advice, or do they self-censor knowing that only the politically desired answer is acceptable?

Empirically, measuring autonomy of *top officials* in the context of local government as well as local *civil service* in general involves examining constitutional/legal provisions and perceptions on the ground: whether local personnel are part of a unified national civil service (implying more central control) or a distinct local service, and whether mechanisms exist to shield officials from arbitrary political dismissal (such as civil service tenure or independent commissions). To capture perceived autonomy, surveys of civil servants – even if it is only the highest-ranking ones – can be illuminating. By analysing these responses alongside formal indicators, the research will map how autonomous or constrained local administrations are across Europe, adding an important structural dimension to the interplay of professionalisation and politicisation.

However, as mentioned above (on p. 6), before examining the manifestation of these the dimensions of autonomy of the municipal administration (and their sub-dimensions) in individual countries, it is important to explore how they were each enabled to prevail in a ‘struggle over ideas’ (Stone 2002) or through the use of ideational power.

Research Design

To investigate these dimensions across European local governments, the study employs a two-phase research strategy that combines qualitative institutional mapping with quantitative survey methods. This mixed-method design allows for both depth of understanding in each context and breadth of empirical evidence across cases. Emphasising both discursive insights and systematic data, the approach is innovative in bridging interpretive analysis with survey data based comparative measurement.

Phase 1: Discursive and institutional characterisation of the field of investigation by country

The first phase of the research will consist of data collection by national experts and academics (i.e. primarily the partners involved in previous as well as the planned survey of mayors):

- a. *Discursive data* will be collected through interpretive policy analysis and discourse mapping. Following approaches such as those proposed by Heinelt and Steffek (2025), this component aims to identify and classify prevailing discourses, storylines, or topoi concerning professionalisation, as well as the discourse coalitions involved in shaping them. Specifically, the analysis will focus on:

1. Narratives about the value or rejection of professionalisation in local government—whether it is viewed as necessary, beneficial, or conversely, as an impediment to political responsiveness or local control;
 2. Dominant views on how professionalisation is or should be achieved (e.g., through legal reforms, training systems, managerial models, or meritocratic recruitment); and
 3. Interpretations of the role and autonomy of top local civil servants—why and how administrative independence is framed as desirable, problematic, or institutionally guaranteed.
- b. *Structured institutional data* will be gathered using a standardized template, enabling cross-national comparability. This includes:
1. general administrative structure, mapping the tiers of local government, types of non-elected administrative leadership, and legal frameworks for local autonomy;
 2. recruitment and career systems, identifying how top-level local civil servants are recruited, promoted, trained, and regulated; understanding whether career paths follow meritocratic principles;
 3. levels and types of administrative autonomy, assessing the formal and practical autonomy of local administrations and the discretion civil servants have in policy and operational domains;
 4. politicisation patterns, exploring the degree and mechanisms of political influence over appointments, administrative decisions, and day-to-day management;
 5. professional discourses and role definitions, capturing how civil service roles are framed in public and institutional discourse: notions of neutrality, loyalty, technical expertise, or political alignment; and
 6. internal variation and reform dynamics, identifying subnational differences and recent trends in administrative reform, decentralization, or managerial change.

The objective of this phase is to generate systematic, theoretically informed, and empirically comparable insights into the discourses, institutional arrangements, and practices that shape the professionalisation of local administration across Europe. This dual strategy—integrating discursive and institutional lenses—enables a more comprehensive understanding of how professionalism is framed, embedded, and contested in different political-administrative traditions. Samples for the collection of the information will be provided by the authors for Germany and Portugal.

The collected information will allow us to create country-level discursive as well as institutional profiles that map the dominant visions and models of local administration in terms of professionalisation, autonomy, and politicisation. These profiles will serve (similar to the project on local state-society relations in which most of the partners of our current network were involved) both as stand-alone analytical outputs (resulting in a first edited volume) and as a foundation for the sampling and contextualization of the subsequent survey phase (second edited volume). This phase will be instrumental in identifying not only patterns of convergence and divergence among European

administrative systems and in refining our conceptual framework in light of actual discursive and institutional diversity but also the (core) group of municipal employees from whom it is expected to ensure professionalisation of local government.

Phase 2: Cross-national survey

The cross-national survey will target the (core) group of municipal employees from whom it is expected to ensure professionalisation of local government. Depending on the country – and identified by the first phase – these can be department heads, division chiefs, city clerks, or chief executives. Respondents will be drawn from a sample (or the total number) of municipalities across the selected countries. We will work through national local government associations or networks where possible, leveraging their membership lists to reach our target group. Given the cross-national scope, the survey instrument will be carefully translated and pilot-tested to ensure comparability of concepts.

The thematic focus of the survey flows directly from our analytical dimensions. We will include modules of questions corresponding to each dimension:

- a) Politicisation measures: These will probe the extent of political influence and neutrality in the respondent's work environment. For example, questions may ask respondents to evaluate statements on a Likert scale, such as 'Recruitment and promotions in this municipality are based on merit rather than political connections' (to reverse-code politicisation) or 'When a new political leadership comes to power, senior staff are replaced' (to capture patronage practices). We might ask how often they feel pressured to adjust decisions due to political considerations, or whether it is expected that civil servants publicly support the mayor's agenda. Such questions translate the abstract concept of politicisation into perceptible experiences or observations.
- b) Professionalisation measures: This section will assess the presence of professional norms and identity. We will include both objective items and attitudinal items. Objective items could cover the respondent's background and the institutional context: e.g., 'Did you enter your position through a competitive exam or open application process?', 'How many years of specialized training or education in public administration do you have?', and 'Are you a member of any professional association for public officials?' Attitudinal items might ask agreement with statements like 'I consider myself a public service professional, not a political actor,' 'Upholding ethical standards is a priority in my daily work,' or 'There exists a strong sense of professional community among the administrative staff in my municipality.'
- c) Autonomy measures: Here we examine individual administrative discretion, e.g., 'I have sufficient discretion to make decisions in my area of work without political interference,' or 'Political leaders in our city respect the boundary between their role and administrative matters.' We can also ask about recent experiences: 'Has an elected official attempted to influence your professional decisions in the last year? If yes, how often?' and about the presence of any formal protections (e.g., 'Is there

a rule or norm that elected officials should not intervene in personnel decisions at your level?”). These questions, combined with context from Phase 1, help quantify the level of autonomy. To capture these dimensions, relevant questions from the U.Di.T.E. leadership survey can also be used – and, of course, the data from the U.Di.T.E. survey. This enables comparisons over time and between the countries covered by the U.Di.T.E. survey and those included in the planned survey.

In addition to these core modules, the survey will collect contextual and socio-demographic variables.

This survey of leading local civil servants can be highly coherent with a discursive-institutionalist framework, capturing ideas, asking about beliefs and self-perceptions (‘how do you see your role in local government?’), exploring justifications for practices (‘what values should guide decision-making in local administration?’), assessing alignment with dominant narratives (‘to what extent do you agree that impartiality is a defining feature of the local civil service?’). On the other hand, coordinative and communicative discourse can be directly addressed with questions like: ‘to what extent are administrative decisions in your municipality based on professional consensus rather than political instruction?’ and ‘do you feel expected to publicly defend political decisions, even when you privately disagree with them?’ We can also identify dominant logics: is the prevailing narrative managerial (‘efficiency’), professional (‘neutrality’), or political (‘responsiveness’, politically desirable, politically feasible)?...

By combining data from local officials across multiple countries, this research will produce an empirical map of our key dimensions, allowing us to identify, for example, clusters of countries or municipalities that share similar profiles (such as high professionalisation and high autonomy but low politicisation, or vice versa), and testing a set of independent variables. This broad overview, grounded in quantifiable evidence, is made meaningful by the prior qualitative phase and theoretical framing. Therefore, this approach will allow insights not only about where European local governments stand on the spectra of politicisation, professionalisation, and autonomy, but also why they are there – as reflected in the ideas and narratives that underpin their administrative systems.

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Notes

- 1 This was the case in Germany, where one of the authors of this paper used the questionnaire of the U.Di.T.E. survey for a survey in this country. A presentation of some survey results from Germany is only available in German (Heinelt and Haus 2002) because the survey could not be completed there before the survey data for the book by Mouritzen and Svava was analysed.
- 2 See for an overview about these surveys until 2016, Heinelt et al. 2018: 3-4. In the meantime, two more surveys were conducted – one with actors involved in local state-society relations (Egner et al. 2022) and one (the second one) with municipal councillors (Heinelt et al. 2026).
- 3 'A discourse coalition is [...] the ensemble of a set of storylines, all organized around a discourse. The discourse coalition approach suggests that politics is a process in which different actors from various backgrounds form specific coalitions around specific storylines' (Hajer, 1993, p. 47). 'In contrast to Sabatier (1998), who employs his advocacy coalition framework as the basis for "a rigorous causal theory of policy change" (Fischer, 2003, p. 112), Hajer's (1995) discourse coalitions are united by narrative storylines that interpret events and courses of action in concrete social context, not by relatively stable beliefs' (Heinelt and Münch 2022: 13).
- 4 In Peters and Pierre (2004a) there are chapters on the politicization of the civil service in Belgium, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK.
- 5 See in this regard the function of boundary spanners highlighted in the organisation and management literature, for example Thompson 1967 and Bergenholtz 2011.
- 6 There one can find more or less detailed information on the training of public officials for the following countries (in brackets, the names of authors of the country chapters who are also involved in our network): Belgium-Flanders (by De Ceuninck and Reynaert), Belgium-Wallonia, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany (by Huzel and Heinelt), Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Latvia (Iveta Reinholde), Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden and Turkey.