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To cite this article: Sebastien Bourdin & André Torre (2020): The territorial big bang: which assessment about the territorial reform in France?, *European Planning Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/09654313.2020.1777943](https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2020.1777943)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2020.1777943>



Published online: 09 Jun 2020.



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# The territorial big bang: which assessment about the territorial reform in France?

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## ABSTRACT

After a new and ambitious reform, referred to as the ‘Territorial Big Bang’, France was confronted, from the end of 2018, with the revolt of the yellow vests, often originating from the country’s most peripheral or troubled territories. These oppositions and contestations from the territories may seem all the more astonishing since the ambitious territorial reform initiated in 2015 and which took shape with the NOTRE and MAPTAM laws aimed precisely at repositioning the role of the territories at each scale. How and why have we arrived at the current result, which seems to revive the historical territorial divide between Paris and the provinces, transforming it into an opposition between the major cities and the rest of France? In this article, we show how the territorial reform of 2015 was a failure and we take stock of the fact that far from affirming a new stage of decentralization, it has consisted above all in favouring large structures and the search for economies of scale, and has left behind territories that don’t matter anymore for the public policies.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 January 2020  
Revised 26 May 2020  
Accepted 26 May 2020

## KEYWORDS

Decentralization; territorial reform; territory; public policy

## Introduction

Barely three years after the launch of a new and ambitious reform, often referred to as the ‘Territorial Big Bang’, France was confronted, from the end of 2018, with the revolt of the yellow vests (Chamorel 2019; Lianos 2019), often originating from the country’s most peripheral or troubled territories. The demands of the latter – originally motivated by an increase in the tax on vehicle fuel and a reduction in their speed to 80 km/h – include many elements of a spatial or territorial nature, the first of which are protests against the planned decline of public services in rural or peripheral areas. Indeed, the gradual withdrawal of hospitals or schools, of post offices, and the removal of regional railway lines in favour of the main routes for high-speed trains or motorways, is leading to a feeling of abandonment and unease which gives rise to numerous demonstrations and protests, creating a difficult and conflictual social climate.

Thus, France, like other countries, finds itself in the grip of problems that fall within the geography of discontent (Dijkstra, Poelman, and Rodríguez-Pose 2019). As in the United Kingdom, Italy or the United States, there has been a rise in extreme or

protest voting, particularly in areas on the periphery or far from major cities (Bruter and Harrison 2011; Van Gent, Jansen, and Smits 2014; Gordon 2018; McCann 2019), in which the *Rassemblement National* gets high scores in France for several years now. But to this protest vote – which expresses the rejection and the voice of voters living in the famous ‘places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) – is added an additional characteristic, which is expressed in the streets. Opposition does not only take place through legal channels, but also takes more frontal and violent forms, which makes it similar to the movement of revolutions and reforms that can be seen all over the world.

These oppositions and contestations from the territories may seem all the more astonishing given that the ambitious territorial reform initiated in 2015 and which took shape with the NOTRE and MAPTAM laws. It intended to achieve administrative simplification and economies of scale, improve the competitiveness of the territories, and put the territorial question and the actors in the territories back at the heart of public policies and to extend the process of French-style decentralization (Cole 2006; Cole and John 2012). How and why have we arrived at the current result, which seems to revive the historical territorial divide between Paris and the provinces, transforming it into an opposition between the major cities and the rest of France? In this article, we show how the territorial reform of 2015 was a failure and we take stock of the fact that far from affirming a new stage of decentralization, it has consisted above all in favouring large structures and the search for economies of scale.

Based on the idea that Big is beautiful, the public authorities have sought above all to increase the size of the regions and give more power and funding to the major metropolises (Pasquier 2016). In doing so, they have forgotten or neglected the territorial dimension, as well as many territories that have found themselves excluded from these changes, or even they have added difficulties as a result of the changes made. The feeling of abandonment and the violent reactions that followed are an indication of this failure. In the following paragraphs we begin with a history of the reform, before presenting the stated objectives, and then look at the links with the territorial policies at work in Europe. We conclude by asking ourselves about the risks presented by this reform, linked in particular to the excessively large size of the regions, which could prevent them from truly specializing, as well as to the paradoxical oblivion of the territories in an approach that was supposed to put them in the forefront.

### **The history of the territorial reform**

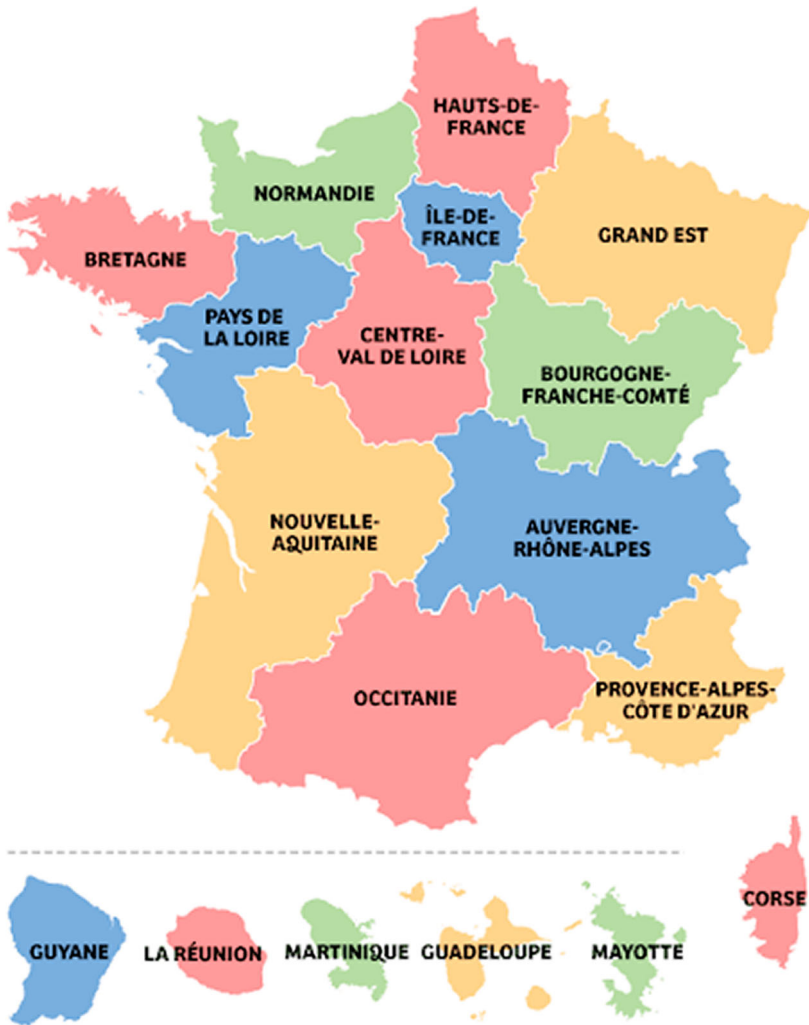
On 3 June 2014, in an op-ed published by many regional dailies, the President of the French Republic, François Hollande, announced the launch of a reform aimed at modifying the territorial architecture of the Republic. It was a question of radically changing the organization of local authorities in a country which then had in 2014 no less than 36,658 municipalities, 2054 cantons, 101 *départements* (NUTS 3 level), 13 metropolises (including Greater Paris) and 27 regions (NUTS 2 level). This territorial reform took place in a context where countries are witnessing a ‘rise of regional authority’ (Hooghe, Marks, and Schakel 2010) or a ‘rise of the meso’ (Loughlin and Keating 2013), which reflects a growing interest in the local conditions for exercising governance (Reiter et al. 2010; Van Langenhove 2016).

In line with the 1982 decentralization laws and the inclusion of the decentralized Republic in the Constitution in 2003 (Thoenig 2005), the President assigned a new ambition to the reform: to simplify and clarify the territorial organization of France (so that everyone knows who decides, who finances and from what resources). He thus proposed a constitutional revision involving a reform of intermunicipalities, a reduction in the number of Regions from 22 to 14, with new competences and adapted financial resources. The main objectives of the future law reforming territorial organization was quickly followed by the presentation, in the Council of Ministers, of two bills giving substance to the operation to simplify France's institutional architecture. While the first concerned the delimitation of the regions and the modalities of regional and departmental elections, the second related to the new territorial organization of the Republic. The debate, which was brought before Parliament, quickly took on a confrontational form and focused on two particular points. The borders of the Regions (and their capitals) on the one hand, and the maintenance or abolition of departments on the other hand.

The arguments in favour of reform were immediately and strongly contested. The pretexts of economy were quickly swept aside, as it turned out that the merger of Regions and the transfer of capacities will entail a substantial cost. The map of the Regions changed contours several times, and the departments saw their place maintained even if they lost some of their competences (Mazzoleni 2015). Metropolises were confirmed as the focal points of regional architecture, around which the activities of other territories or authorities must be organized. The NOTRE law is finally voted by weary parliamentarians, in an electoral climate that was not conducive to long-term thinking, between recent departmental consultations and the future regional elections.

Beyond the traditional incantations on the need to reform and simplify the territorial 'millefeuille', it appears in fact that the differences were particularly strong on the levels to be eliminated. The initially stated idea of abolishing the *départements* will be long-lasting, following the mobilization of local elected officials, who insisted on the services rendered by these *départements*, but also because of the difficulty in distributing their numerous competences and the related financing to other parts of the institutional system. In particular, rural elected representatives highlighted the services provided by the departments in areas that were sometimes isolated, far from metropolitan areas and with populations in difficulty. Their usefulness was also often stressed, particularly in terms of social cohesion, so that their maintenance was finally acquired.

Another problem concerned the borders of the new Regions, as well as the merger of some of them, which must be carried out on identical perimeters since no internal reconfiguration is allowed. This very French little game, which has already been played by various think tanks, including the Balladur Commission in 2009, gave rise to a number of debate, involving both the Presidents of the Regions concerned and the Mayors of the regional capitals, who did not want to lose their prerogatives. The map initially proposed by François Hollande was quickly discarded and replaced, in the course of the discussions, by variable configurations and architectures, which more often responded to the need for local alliances than to rationalization or economic imperatives. After various changes and questioning, the map of 13 Regions finally retained revealed that mergers were particularly concentrated in the South-West, North and East of France (Map 1).



**Map 1.** The new map officially adopted by the French Government.

Beyond these events, the debates, which extended to planning and development specialists and technicians or civil society, not to mention various pressure groups, revealed very strong questions and fractures within French society. First of all, was it necessary to reorganize the territorial architecture of the Republic, and if so, with what objective? Secondly, did this reform lead to savings? Finally, have all populations and territories benefited from the new laws? In order to answer these questions, we have collected multiple material (official texts and laws, reports from parliamentary assemblies, reports from the Court of Auditors, reports from different associations such as the French Mayors' Association or the Association of Rural Mayors) allowing us to have an overview of the points of view developed by the main political actors of this reform. We also launched a national consultation of researchers and stakeholders on this question, and collected several analytical contributions. We completed the analysis of these documents by reviewing several initiatives undertaken at the local level and resulting, at least in part, from the territorial reform.

## The stated objectives

From the outset, the objectives of territorial reform appear to be multiple. We shall now return to them, examining these justifications and questioning the legitimacy of the arguments put forward to speed up or, on the contrary, slow down the ongoing process.

The first stated objective is that of simplifying and clarifying the territorial ‘millefeuille’, which would be a factor of paralysis due to its complexity and multiple layers (communes, inter-communalities, *départements*, regions, etc.). The idea behind this ‘division of labour’ is to simplify the daily life of residents and businesses in their dealings (who does what? who to contact?) in order to improve the effectiveness of aid mechanisms. Henceforth, planning and economic action – such as direct aid to businesses – are reserved for the regions and social action and solidarity for the *départements*, while the municipalities and their groupings are in charge of town planning and the organization of day-to-day public services.

But this reduction of the ‘millefeuille’ is in reality a decoy. The number of regions or communes has been reduced, but not the institutional layers. Reducing the number of regions does not automatically lead to a simplification of the French territorial administrative organization. The cohesion objective is a response to the desire to reduce the gaps between the French Regions, both from an economic and demographic point of view. However, there is a contradiction in the wishes of a regulatory State which (i) advocates a rebalancing and wishes to reduce inequalities between Regions by reducing their number, but (ii) at the same time accelerates decentralization at the risk of increasing territorial disparities within each Region. The cohesion sought at a given scale will not necessarily be sought at other scales.

The second objective, linked to the previous one, is to achieve economies of scale by increasing the size of Regions and inter-municipalities. During the presentation of the bill, figures were given by André Vallini (the Secretary of State for Territorial Reform) who announced savings of around 25 billion euros, soon to be reduced to 15. The demonstration did not convince the opponents of the reform and in the face of criticism, the Government revised this figure downwards – whose calculation methods are difficult to grasp – which would finally be 10 billion over ten years, in return for an overall effort to reduce the expenditure of local authorities by 5%–10%. Today everyone agrees that the merger has resulted in additional budgetary costs due to the relocation of services, their integration and the alignment of the salary scales of territorial civil servants, whose numbers will vary little, while the savings to be expected are low due to good regional management. On the contrary, the merger of the regions initially caused significant additional costs. For example, the observed growth in expenditure between 2017 and 2018 of the seven merged regions is higher (11.9% to €37.25 million) than that of the non-merged regions (6.1% to €12.65 million) (see [Table 1](#)).

A telling example concerns Occitanie, which has chosen not to hold any of its plenary assemblies in the regional capital city in the name of a desire for balance within the merged region: its regional council meets in plenary session in Montpellier, and not in Toulouse. Moreover, neither of the two hemicycles can accommodate the 150 elected members of the regional council: while the one located in Toulouse could be the subject of development work for this purpose, for an amount estimated at €7 million by the local authority, the configuration of the one in Montpellier excludes any possibility of substantial resizing.

**Table 1.** Additional annual expenditure of the regions' indemnity plan between 2016 and 2021.

Regions	Increase in the annual amount of the indemnity plan* between 2016 and 2021
Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes	3–4 M€
Bourgogne-Franche-Comté	2 M€
Grand Est	16 M€
Hauts-de-France	0,65 M€
Normandie	10 M€
Nouvelle-Aquitaine	14–17 M€
Occitanie	3,7 M€

Source: reports of the Regional audit chambers.

\*The indemnity plan represents the budget of the region dedicated to the payment of civil servants' salaries.

The local authority is therefore calling on a service provider to organize these sessions at the Montpellier 120 exhibition centre, for an initial unit cost of €140,000 (which has now been reduced to €98,000).

However, even if savings are made in the operating costs of the new Regions by eliminating duplications, reducing the number of elected representatives and pooling services, the fact remains that the bulk of expenditure – for example the TER (regional express trains) or secondary schools – will not be halved. Recent studies lead by the French Audit Court even suggest that the cost of merging the Regions would have been relatively high in the end, due to the restructuring required, as well as the cost of merging services, the movement of people and administrations, and the revaluation of the salaries of the least well-paid staff compared to their colleagues in other Regions. It would have been interesting to try to measure the critical size of the transition from economies to diseconomies of scale. Indeed, the reduced flexibility and loss of proximity resulting from the merging of regions can lead to additional costs for the community.

The argument most often put forward, but probably also the most discussed, concerns the rationalization of public budgetary expenditure by moving from 22 to 13 Regions. 27.9 billion in 2012, i.e. only 22% of the expenditure of local and regional authorities (out of a total of 225.9 billion), which does not seem excessive. The reform thus differs from previous ones in that it does not aim to increase the volume of local finances but rather to rationalize them. The Government justifies the savings in the budgets of local authorities by promising to contain the increase in local taxation and thus free up public investment capacity.

The third objective concerns the quest to increase the competitiveness of the Regions by increasing their size. This neo-liberal ideological discourse on the need to strengthen economic competitiveness (Brennetot 2018) has led to a questioning of the departmental level in favour of the regional level (Bristow 2005 and 2010). The idea of the Big is beautiful is based on the desire to place France in the global competition, with larger, more visible and stronger entities and metropolises whose weight would be reinforced (MAPTAM law). This principle is disconnected from the search for the 'relevant territory', which is based on a logic of geography, functionality (linked to the customs of the inhabitants) or identity (history, culture). It should be noted that the groupings of regions projected by the impact study, in support of which socio-economic arguments were proposed, will not be those retained in the law promulgated on 16 January 2015.<sup>1</sup>

One may wonder whether regions such as Aquitaine or Rhône-Alpes were so narrow that they had to be merged with other neighbouring regions? All the more so as it is impossible to prove a link between the size of the regions and their dynamism. Competitiveness cannot be decreed; it is built with a long-term strategy and an adequate budget. However, the merger of the regions has led to the addition of the resources of the old entities but has not given the new regions significantly extended competences to the point of competing with the large European regions of neighbouring countries. Thus, Bavaria's budget alone in 2015 was double the budget of all the French regions, reflecting the major differences in institutional organization.

Some even support the idea that the increase in the size of the regions only accentuates the need for other levels of proximity such as the *département*, whose future remains in doubt. The creation of metropolises – with the desire to replace the *départements* from 2021 to 2022 – leaves the question of rural areas unresolved. Moreover, and whereas for a long time the commune was the local level par excellence of proximity to the citizen (Schmidt 2007), inter-communality has been a tremendous success. The new communities of municipalities or agglomerations could well become this new intermediate level of proximity, justifying the rise of groupings of municipalities so as to reach a threshold of at least 20,000 inhabitants.

Finally, an argument very often put forward in favour of spatial reorganization concerned the development of democracy at the local level, the rationalization of public action and the clarification of competences, in particular between the different territorial authorities. In fine, the NOTRE law leads to a limited but very real redistribution of competences, especially between Regions and *départements*, at the cost of abandoning some of their prerogatives. Henceforth, planning and economic action – such as direct aid to companies – are reserved for the Regions and social action and solidarity for the *départements*, while the municipalities and their groupings are in charge of town planning and the organization of day-to-day public services. If the simplification operation has not been on the scale desired by the government, it is real. The abandonment of the general competences clause<sup>2</sup> can also be considered as a step forward, helping to identify the devolution of each of the levels, putting a brake on the scattering of expenditure and limiting the willingness to intervene on all fronts (see table in the annexes). However, beyond the question of the perimeter of future Regions, there was room to think about real progress in terms of decentralization and reorganization, in particular in favour of employment or development, to keep pace with contemporary developments. Today there are indeed challenges in terms of extending economic competences and the resources allocated to the Regions, which remain low, even though the Regions have done a huge amount of work in terms of reflection and the implementation of their major priorities with the development of Regional Innovation Strategies (RIS) in terms of European Smart Specialisation. Furthermore, the question of the identity of the Regions and above all the sense of belonging and involvement of their inhabitants is raised. Indeed, one of the achievements of the reform is that it has increased the legitimacy of the role played by the Regions, because of the media coverage of the debate on their geographical borders and the groupings that have taken place. This discussion has contributed to their definitive recognition as one of the major organizations in the structure of the State, ahead of the departments or municipalities, so that no one disputes their pre-eminent place in the architecture of the French Republic.



### ***What European integration? A reform that comes at the same time as the EU's smart specialization policies***

One of the stated objectives of the territorial reform is to 'provide the French regions with a critical size enabling them to exercise the strategic competences assigned to them on the right scale, to compete with comparable authorities in Europe and to achieve efficiency gains' (text of the draft law NOTRE). This objective is similar to that has been already pursued in other European countries, in a somewhat different economic context. Indeed, compared to their European neighbours, the French regions have a very low budget and competences; the centralizing French State is still a reality. For example, while the average expenditure of European regions is 4000 euros per year per inhabitant, that of French regions is ten times lower.

In spite of these differences, territorial reform seems to be following, as in other European countries, a twofold movement of deepening the role of the regional level and the major cities, but also of affirming the metropolis-region couple. If we look at the reform processes at work in countries such as Italy, Portugal, Spain or the Netherlands, we can see that regions and metropolises are on the rise everywhere (Lang and Török 2017; Rozenblat and Pumain 2018), while intermediate territorial levels such as departments seem to be called into question. This is the case in Italy, for example, where Matteo Renzi has passed a bill reducing the powers of the provinces with the aim of abolishing them definitively in the long term. The 'Renzimania' was also accompanied by an accelerated and in-depth constitutional reform, with consensus on both the left and the right (Caruso, Pede, and Saccomani 2019). The transfer of competences to the regions is also being systematised in many countries. For example, the Belgian State has transferred to its three regions the sum of 17 billion euros, corresponding to new competences acquired in the field of health and employment (De Ceuninck, Steyvers, and Valcke 2016).

At the same time, the lowest common denominator of territorial organization, the municipality, accused of being the most spendthrift territorial level, tends to be increasingly questioned. The economic crisis has favoured municipal groupings in Europe in order to reduce operating costs. Globalization and increased competition between territorial authorities have also led to the need for better pooling of resources. This is notably the case in Greece, where the number of municipalities has been divided by three in 2011. An argument often put forward in France to push for a reduction in the number of municipalities is that 40% of European municipalities are French. Nevertheless, far from being a French exception, municipal fragmentation also affects other countries, even if not in the same proportions. While the merger of municipalities remains a failure in France and Spain – favouring more intermunicipality, and thus a new layer of the 'millefeuille' – other countries have been resolutely engaged in the process since the 1970s, such as the Scandinavian and Central and Eastern European countries, the United Kingdom and Germany in particular (Bran, Bodislav, and Rădulescu 2019).

Looking at the level of the European Union, it can be seen that a good part of European policies, including cohesion policy, have taken a territorial turn since the 2010s, after the criticisms addressed to the Lisbon policy – which aimed to make Europe the world's leading technological power – in particular following the Barca report (2009). The diagnosis of this policy revealed several limitations (Giannitsis 2009) and it has been demonstrated that there is a need for territorialization of the EU cohesion policy (Bourdin 2019).

In particular the smaller share of European economies composed of high-tech, R&D intensive sectors, the fragmentation of R&D efforts, which prevented the emergence of critical mass effects and of localized learning processes, and the insufficient attention to the differences between the different regions and territories of the EU, due to the 'one size fits all' technology development policy. In addition, many of the policies implemented by EU public authorities to promote convergence between the economies of European states (such as ERDF programmes) have been unable to prevent processes of marginalization and are now sharply criticized and funding for these programmes has been significantly reduced (Camagni and Capello 2013; Berkowitz et al. 2015).

The reform of European growth and development policies has focused on a place-based approach and on the differentiating advantages imagined in the framework of smart specialization. The so-called Smart Specialization Strategy (S3) or policy, is very different from previous ones, in that it takes greater account of knowledge networks, spatial dimensions, as well as regionally specific modes of governance (McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2013). In concrete terms, in order for regions to receive development funds, they must establish programmes and projects aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship and innovation, based on a strategy explicitly drawn up on the basis of an inventory of the territory's strengths, and particularly of the regional and territorial areas and the networks linked to them. The EU invited each region to choose a few key domains or activities or technologies, based on three criteria: the overall context (the chosen activity should fit into a value chain and not be isolated at the local level), specialization in specific fields of activity, and coherent diversification through related variety (the sectors selected must be closely related or belong to interconnected and complementary fields of activity). To qualify for development funds, EU regions have had to set up programmes and projects aimed at promoting entrepreneurship and innovation. Thus, in principle, the logic of the policy prioritization process is neither exclusive nor exhaustive but is based on thematic choices and is conceived to promote competition in resource allocation proposals (McCann 2015).

According to the European Commission, regional smart specialization strategies thus lead to a more comprehensive set of development objectives and encourage regions to build their innovation strategies both on the basis of the existing structure and according to the potential for diversification. For French regions, the deployment of RIS-IS is taking place in the context of the territorial reform of merging regions and the strengthening of the competences of metropolises and regional councils in the field of economic development. The implementation of this reform is likely to change the links between regions, as well as between regions and metropolises. Their strategies in terms of higher education, research and innovation could be impacted. The implementation of the SRI-SI will therefore have to take into account this new territorial balance.

### ***Too big to be smart? The risks and limits of the reform***

If we link the characteristics of the new French regions to the smart specialization process underway at European level, the first and most obvious risk is that of a lack of specialization. Indeed, while the European policy of smart specialization in Horizon 2020 and then now 2030 emphasizes the choice, by each of the Regions, of a limited number of activities or technologies that are an integral part of a value chain, and therefore a differentiation of

functions and production, we can fear the opposite effect of the birth of macro-Regions. The latter, organized around their metropolises, are in fact often tempted to behave like small States, reproducing all the internal skills and specializations, without making any real development choices, at the risk of fragmentation and trivialization. This could result in a loss of competitiveness and attractiveness, amplified by the lack of brand image of the new regional entities.

The study carried out on the different choices of intelligent specialization strategies of the former 22 French regions (CGET 2015) shows that several new regions are encountering difficulties in bringing out the highlights of their economic fabric and innovation ecosystem, and thus in choosing strategic areas of specialization. While those of the former Upper and Lower Normandy, now united in the new Normandy region, are similar in their broad outlines (sustainable materials, energy and wind transition, biomedical science and technologies), others are experiencing more difficulties, due to the diversity of specific technological fields or sectors.

But this reform also brings with it a number of other risks of an economic and social nature, identified by commentators and researchers. They concern the organization of the Republic but also the place given to the territories and the different levels of governance in France, as well as the well-being of local populations.

The first and most obvious problem is again linked to the size of the new regions; some have become veritable mastodons, the equivalent of which is hard to find in other European countries. One thinks in particular of the Nouvelle Aquitaine (whose surface area is now larger than that of Austria), Centre or Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne Regions. It is obvious that this increase in volume is causing a part of the population to move away from the decision-making centres, and in particular from the regional capital. We are seeing the emergence of a recentralised organization at the level of the large regions, which in turn reproduce the centralized functioning of France, by organizing themselves around their capitals. Many local elected representatives or officials are now more than two or three hours away from their regional capitals by road, and often much more by rail, and find it difficult to make their voices heard and to represent the people's interests. The remoteness, coupled with the reign of the metropolises, has undoubtedly contributed to the feeling of a new withdrawal of the State from peripheral or rural territories, considered as abandoned. It may be thought that it is not unrelated to the feeling of abandonment and isolation felt and manifested by the yellow vests (Grossman 2019).

A negative effect of regional reconfigurations on territorial equity is also to be expected. The merging of regions is likely to increase the concentration of activities in the most productive areas. It could lead to a reduction in the quality, or even a lack, of local services, unless new ones are set up or local public services are increased, which is neither in line with history nor in terms of cost reduction. There is legitimate concern for the inhabitants of 'border' areas or territories furthest from large cities or metropolises, in a context of diminishing public resources, rationalization of equipment and the elimination of many local services (high schools, vocational training, hospitals, post offices, etc.) or railway lines. The revolt of the yellow vests raised these problems with the gradual withdrawal of many services from rural areas, including State services, and the obligation to increase travel for the inhabitants of the most peripheral areas.

By fostering closer ties between favoured and less favoured territories, territorial reform has helped to reduce demographic and wealth disparities between regions. For example,

excluding Île-de-France and Corsica (where the differences are too extreme), the range [in terms of GDP] around the average has gone from +15.6% to -13.9% to only +11.7% to -8.4% according to INSEE. In other words, the gap in wealth from one territory to another has narrowed, with the richer regions raising the average of the poorer regions with which they have merged. In particular, these mergers have made it possible to make up part of the gap with Ile-de-France and Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne. Since 2016, five new regions have each accounted for 7% or more of France's GDP, compared with just one (PACA) in 2012. At the same time, the GDP of these six large regions (including Auvergne Rhône-Alpes) accounts for almost half of the national GDP (47.7%). The new super-regions should theoretically be better equipped to compete with their European counterparts.

But this statistical effect is, for the moment, purely virtual. The fact that the new Rhône-Alpes-Auvergne region contributes a larger share of national GDP does not change the situation of the Auvergne region alone. Generally speaking, we are touching here on the contradictions of a regulatory State, which wishes to reduce inequalities between regions by reducing their number but runs the risk of increasing territorial disparities within each region. This is illustrated by the example of the new Alsace-Champagne-Ardenne-Lorraine region, which has many internal difficulties, particularly in terms of economic development (only two departments out of ten have a GDP/capita above the European Union average!). This results in inter-territorial disparities which are very significant. While some departments have a combination of difficulties, such as the Ardennes, the Vosges or the Moselle, others have socio-economic indicators in the black, such as the Marne and the Bas-Rhin, whose economic dynamism is driven by the former regional capitals. Strasbourg is unquestionably becoming the centre of gravity of the new region, at the risk of widening the gaps that have become structural.

Finally, a third risk stems from the uncertainties over the links between territorial authorities, and especially the relationship between the Region and the metropolises, as the latter are being given greater autonomy and extended functions, if not a driving role. This is not only a question of collaboration between levels, but even more so of the capacity to jointly generate spillover or development effects and initiate common dynamics at regional level. As a result, the removal of the general competence clause could reduce the impact of the action of local authorities, by compartmentalizing them within a defined field of action, whereas territorial development, on the contrary, presupposes multidimensional action and multiple synergies. This limitation is likely to prove all the more important as the authorities' capacity for action will be increasingly constrained financially by the obligations they will have to fulfil with a budget allocated by Parliament.

### ***Forgetting the territorial dimension and the dream of an urban France***

Reforming the organization of France, creating metropolises, merging regions, building large inter-municipal bodies, this may seem motivating and exhilarating. But what about the citizens of France, those who bring life to the territories, especially when they live in less urbanized, peri-urban or peripheral areas? Has the law thought about them? And what consideration is given to all the territories that make up the national whole, that constitute its living forces, beyond the administrative entities?

The territorial reform was based on the idea that France is first and foremost an urban country, whose organization should be structured around a certain number of large cities and then, through successive disaggregations, medium-sized communes or inter-communal bodies, leading to the creation of a network of rural areas in towns and villages. It is above all the metropolises that have been highlighted and are the subject of all the attention, with the future of France thus taking shape around its most densely populated and densely populated territories. The latter are considered to play a structuring role, by organizing their hinterlands, but also by steering the future of rural territories, in particular through the contractualisation tools attributed to them in the MAPTAM law. They are thus in a position to produce the food resources necessary for their daily functioning (urban food) and to set aside leisure areas for young or older urban dwellers, who will be able to take advantage of landscaping amenities or satisfy their desire for nature (leisure or nature functions).

Indeed, some parts of the text on metropolises have been deleted, but the central argument remains that the reforms have strengthened metropolises but neglected rural territories. However, the map of intermunicipal groupings has been redrawn everywhere and has led to significant changes in areas where small communities of communes are located in order to increase their administrative capacity. The regions.

Consequently, even though the groupings of municipalities largely encouraged by the law have created a new intermediate level of proximity and have enabled rural communes to increase their administrative and financial capacity (notably by contracting with the *Region* the co-financing of projects with each groupings of municipalities and encouraging them to develop their own projects for the future of the territory), the fact remains that these groupings of municipalities have primarily benefited the large groupings, i.e. the metropolises. The most rural municipalities do not benefit from the large inter-communalities, they do not belong to the agglomeration communities. However, these communities of rural communes do not have the means to commission major policies and receive little State subsidies because they are outside the system of metropolises identified by the public authorities. If they are not far from the metropolises, they can benefit from contracts with the latter in terms of local food or leisure activities. But when they are further away – which is obviously the case for most rural areas – they remain on the sidelines. The question of differences in resources and means according to the different communities of communes (from metropolitan to very rural) is a major challenge in terms of public policy.

This vision of the ‘big is beautiful’ quickly proved to be dangerous, as it led to forgetting part of the territories, more specifically the rural ones. These territories are often seen as far from dynamic. However, according to the latest INSEE statistics, 1 in 3 French people live in a commune with less than 3500 inhabitants and, among rural communes, more than 80% of them are growing in population (between 1999 and 2018). Indeed, while they are present in the expectations and the very title of the reform, they are largely neglected, in their diversity, in the project and the final text. This is partly the story of a misunderstanding. The territories referred to in the text of the law, without insisting too much, are those of local public policies, constituted by local authorities. They are ‘given’ and institutional territories, the *Region* or the *département* for example, a common geographical delimitation around which development strategies will be built. But there is no question of lived territories or territories built by the actors, whose boundaries are rather vague

and which nevertheless play an essential role in local dynamics as well as in the renewal of citizen initiatives.

However, the territories constructed refer to organized relations, groups or particular populations, which identify themselves in common projects rather than delimited borders. Collective productions, resulting from the actions of an organized human group, territories are not only geographical entities. In permanent construction, they are part of the long term, with a history and concerns rooted in local cultures and habits, the perception of a sense of belonging, as well as forms of political authority, specific rules of organization and functioning. These territories, which have been translated into ephemeral terms such as ‘Pays’ or more ethereal terms such as ‘Bassins de vie’, are very real and are a sign of the inescapable diversity of France, beyond the urban-centric vision of the metropolises and the areas dedicated to their services. Thus, the State could facilitate the possibility of local initiatives (i) by loosening the legal framework and giving the possibility of local institutional experimentations in cities or communities of communes, for example by giving a legal framework to charters at the local level (ii) by further promoting the social and solidarity economy (iii) by encouraging the reterritorialization of agriculture (4) by increasing aid for the circular economy (e.g. methanization, recycling plants, economy of functionality ...).

As territories of initiative and projects, they reveal well differentiated modes of operation and (non-) development, the lack of recognition of which has led to two types of problems.

- (1) First in terms of democracy or the representation of opinions and the people’s voice. The reform was undertaken without prior consultation or involvement of local populations in the decisions. This is all the more unfortunate since the territories of France are characterized by a very strong and growing interest on the part of the latter in their modalities of functioning or development. For example, in the first round of the 2014 municipal elections, there was a 26-point difference in voter turnout between municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants and those with more than 90,000 inhabitants. Moreover, the multiplication of associations and the growing involvement of local stakeholders (individuals, associations, businesses, cooperatives, various networks, local systems and mechanisms, etc.) are evidence of this, revealing that the various components of civil society are willing to play a crucial role in the definition of future projects and developments in the territories. An INSEE study in 2015 on associative life shows that the inhabitants of rural communes are more likely to be volunteers than those in big cities.

In this respect, rather than government, we should talk about territorial governance. Governance understood as the set of processes and mechanisms through which the various stakeholders contribute to the elaboration, sometimes concerted, sometimes conflictual, of common projects for the future development of the territories (Torre and Traversac 2011). Numerous collective initiatives such as local charters, think tanks, governance mechanisms, land resource management methodologies, cooperative initiatives, etc. are being developed, not to mention the rise in conflicts due to the voices of the populations and their opposition to certain projects promoted from above, whether by large companies or public authorities (Torre and Wallet 2014). It would be appropriate

to make room for these expressions of democracy coming from the territories and to give them a place in a genuine reform directed towards the latter.

- (1) The second type of problem arises in terms of innovations, resources and production capacities. The idea of entrusting the future of France to the metropolises casts serious doubt on the future of sparsely populated territories, considered, at best, to be at the service of large conurbations. This option overlooks the particularly significant growth of these areas in recent years (over the period 1999–2015, where more than 80% of rural municipalities have positive growth – INSEE National Institute of Statistics), but it also neglects certain very specific dimensions of these territories. First of all, it should be remembered that the wealth of France, a country deprived of mining and energy resources, lies above all in two assets: its landscapes and its diversity on the one hand, resulting from its vast expanse (the largest country in the EU), the diversity of its terroirs and its climatic and geomorphological varieties; the quality and diversity of its human resources on the other hand, with extremely diverse skills and experience, depending on the location, origins and types of production.

This double diversity is strongly felt in low-density, rural and peripheral territories, which are sometimes characterized by their dynamism, productivity and capacity for innovation. It should be recalled that many large companies with high export performances are located in these zones (Michelin, Limagrain ...) and that the productivity of French agriculture is one of the highest in the world. But the dynamics of the territories are not limited to this, and above all concern the importance and variety of innovations, organizational, social and institutional, that are characteristic of the zones that are not included in the fourteen French metropolises.

Indeed, a growing number of examples attest to a broad capacity for innovation and creativity of local actors, including in territories that are not technologically intensive (cooperative projects facilitating the settlement of people who do not come from an agricultural background and promoting organic farming; cooperative grocery store project promoting social ties and the dynamism of a village). These territorial innovations call on the inventiveness of local populations, without necessarily being linked to a high level of industrialization or productive specialization. They reveal the vitality of territories, which demonstrate their dynamism and capacity for renewal by mobilizing local forces. Examples include the development of short proximity circuits, which consist in bringing producers, often farmers, and consumers closer together, with the possibility of identifying the origin of the products consumed and avoiding industrial intermediaries deemed too costly or dangerous to health. In addition to controlling the origin of food, there is a social dimension, through familiarity with the producer or collaborative relationships between producers and/or sellers, as well as the integration and recreation of social ties, for example through cooperative production, the creation of solidarity grocery stores or places for the distribution and sale of products.

These new practices are the basis for a more territorially focused economic operation. Most importantly, however, they help to create and maintain a strong social fabric at the local level and make a fundamental contribution to the resilience of territories, making it possible to limit or plug territorial fractures that are too strong or the rise in neglect or relegation of rural or peri-urban areas. It is on their existence that many rural or peripheral

French territories rely for their continued existence and existence. It is also largely from these territories that the revolt of the yellow vests started, led by people who felt isolated and abandoned from power in areas too often left without much help from the State and public authorities.

## Conclusion

One of the arguments put forward by the promoters of the French territorial reform (The French Government and politicians) was that it could give a power of initiative to the living forces of the nation, or at least to its most important components in terms of population volumes. This was the main reason for the initiatives taken in favour of strengthening the role and competences of the metropolises, recognizing the highly urban character of the French population and a clear rebalancing in favour of the most densely populated areas, from which new dynamics were hoped for, as well as a more balanced representation of the different categories of assets. Moreover, the massive increase in the size of the regions was also expected to enable them to play a more important role at European level and to have a greater say in the decision-making process by becoming key players in development policies.

Unfortunately, a certain number of points had been totally forgotten or strongly neglected in this improvised reform, foremost among which was the place of peripheral or rural territories, which make up the bulk of France's geographical map. The revolt of the yellow vests and the feeling of exclusion that it carries has shown to what extent the big bang has proved to be a costly exercise, by not allowing local initiatives to develop and populations to participate in them. Furthermore, over and above the considerable efforts in financial and human terms to bring together the regions and administrative services, it is proving difficult for them to join the European concert and play an important role in it, for two main reasons. The first is linked to their weak financial capacity, which prevents them from having ambitious economic and growth policies and from asserting their choices. The second is linked to their very large size, which makes it difficult to make any real attempt at specialization because of the diversity of the areas they now cover and their own and sometimes widely contrasting specificities.

## Notes

1. Thus, the initial draft law did not provide for a merger for the regions Aquitaine ('its economic and social balance and its size justify that this region should remain on its own') and Nord-Pas-de-Calais ('there is no reason to group the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region with other regional entities; its economic dynamism and its central location in Europe make this entity a major asset for France'). Champagne-Ardenne and Picardy were grouped together to give rise to 'a border and maritime area of more than 3.2 million inhabitants integrated and linked to both the European economic backbone and the Ile-de-France region', as were the Centre, Limousin and Poitou-Charentes regions, on the grounds that 'the new area comprising these three regions already constitutes a particularly integrated whole thanks to a road network strengthening interconnections (A20-A10 network), particularly with the capital region'.
2. legal concept reflecting a local authority's capacity for initiative in an area of competence over and above those assigned to it by law, on the basis of its territorial interest in the subject matter – In UK and Ireland (« general competence »), or in Germany (« allgemeine Zuständigkeitsvermutung »).



## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Annexes

### Share of the competences between territorial authorities

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