

# Local Leadership During the Territorial Amalgamation Process – The Case of Latvia

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The article aims to present evidence of the role of the mayors in the territorial amalgamation process, focusing on their relationship with voters and other stakeholders and on the transformation processes experienced by local governments. Given their status as the highest-ranking officials enjoying voters' and deputies' support, mayors play an essential role in either implementing or, on the contrary, impeding local government reforms. As they have the power, knowledge, and expertise to influence the implementation of local government reforms, it becomes essential to evaluate their role.

**Design:** The article examines the role of mayors in local government reforms, particularly in the context of the recent territorial amalgamation reforms in Latvia. Through a literature review and analysis of results from the recent amalgamation, the article explores the complex relationships that mayors have with other stakeholders and the transformation processes within their respective local governments.

**Findings:** The study highlights the importance of mayors in providing effective leadership during reform initiatives and the potential implications for their reputation and electoral outcomes. The results show that mayors primarily use media, public consultations, public letters, and even the possibility of resignation to influence the territorial amalgamation process.

**Academic contribution to the field:** While there has been research on territorial amalgamation, the role of the mayor is often overlooked, especially in a top-down initiated process where, despite its features, the mayor still possesses the tools to shape the course of the territorial amalgamation process. The article presents the reform experience in Latvia as a small state.

**Value:** This research provides valuable insights into the role of mayors in the territorial amalgamation process in Latvia and its implications for

local government reform. The findings contribute to the existing literature by comprehensively analysing the mayor's influence on the reform agenda and implementation strategies.

*Keywords:* local government, territorial amalgamation, local leadership, Latvia

*JEL:* H83, R58

## 1 Introduction

Local public authorities have traditionally been a platform where reforms have been experimented with and with varying impacts on the overall institutional framework. There has been the third wave of amalgamation reforms as several countries have recently initiated territorial amalgamation reforms (Swianiewicz et al., 2017). Mayors have played an essential role in implementing or, on the contrary, non-implementing these reforms as the highest-ranking officials in local governments. They have the ability to influence the implementation of local government reform through their power, knowledge and expertise. They have the capacity to shape the reform agenda, create a space for dialogue among stakeholders and make decisions with a long-term orientation. Furthermore, mayors are in a privileged position to negotiate and collaborate with other stakeholders, such as the national government, local and regional politicians, entrepreneurs and civil society.

Additionally, their strategies and approaches are likely to affect the efficiency and effectiveness of the reform process significantly (Kübler et al., 2020). At the same time, their reputation may be rapidly diminished as they are closer to the electorate, and voters can affect election results in Latvia. This article presents evidence of the link between the role of the Latvian mayor during territorial reform process and their relationship with the local governments they lead, other stakeholders involved and the transformation processes to which these local governments are subject. The research question is as follows: what kind of role does the mayor have in the territorial amalgamation process in Latvia?

The discussions on the need for administrative-territorial reform started immediately after the independence of Latvia. In 2009, the first territorial amalgamation aimed to create economically viable local governments that would provide qualitative services to their citizens. Recently, in 2021, there was the second territorial amalgamation. Its main aim was to improve national and local government's economic growth and competitiveness. In addition, the aims also included rationalisation of budgetary resources, the improvement of the capacity and autonomy of local government, an attractive environment for investment and job creation and the reduction of emigration (VARAM, 2021).

This article firstly represents a literature review of theories that explains and describes the mayor's role in the local government reform process and the stakeholders involved, along with the context of Latvian local government

reforms and the system. Secondly, there is an analysis of Latvia's latest local government reform process, including mayors' and stakeholders' roles. Thirdly, based on studies, the positions that mayors take concerning territorial reform processes are identified in Latvia.

## **2 Literature review**

A review of mayors' positions on local government reform is closely linked to the academic debate on the division of roles and functions between mayors (as local political leaders) and local government managers and civil servants and the relationship between them (Alba and Navarro, 2006). However, in this article, the relationship in the administration of the local government is not analyzed, but the role the mayor takes while the administrative territorial reforms take place.

It is essential to look at the interaction between mayors and involved stakeholders, their role in local governance during reform processes, and how they interact not only with each other but also at the national level. As Swianiewicz et al. (2022) states, many aspects of territorial reforms may trigger conflicts and disagreement, and strong disagreement/resistance may be even harsher in countries with failed reform attempts. Thus there is many stakeholders involved, for example, at the reform-deciding level of government (ministries, the government and the parliament), at the local level, and at different levels of public institutions and other relevant stakeholders (Swianiewicz et al., 2022). The lines of conflicts may be not just, for instance, between different political parties at the same level of government, but also within the same political party at the national/regional level and local level. In addition, conflicts between stakeholders with positional interests other than political-ideological interests are evoked. However, there have been territorial amalgamation reform in 2009. The administrative-territorial reform shifted from two-tier to one-tier local government: 26 district councils were abolished, towns, their rural areas and local governments were merged into districts, and nine large cities were granted the status of republican towns. In addition, it was decided to rename all rural areas of cities as local governments to restore their historical names or to add them to existing ones. The county's merged administrative territories (towns and parishes) acquired the status of a county territorial unit and kept their names.

The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development (further in the text – MEPRD), which monitors local governments, did a review of the reform mentioned above, and they concluded that the local government system in many areas was not meeting the criteria for the establishment of local governments established by law. This issue was further compounded by the lack of strong development centers, which has hindered the ability to implement a balanced regional development policy. Moreover, the local government system was heterogeneous in terms of population, making it challenging to decentralize functions. This created a situation where transferring certain functions to local governments was complex. Furthermore,

many small local governments were made, and they could not independently carry out their autonomous functions due to a lack of sufficient tax revenue base and financial resources. As a result, it was difficult for these local governments to carry out rational and efficient administration (MEPRD, 2013). And after this report, there were many discussions going on. As Swianiewicz et al. (2022) describes, there was political-ideological conflict, center-periphery, central-local government and large versus small entities conflicts. There is also a part for the mayor and his party in the Council in all these conflict types.

Several comparative studies on local administrative reforms have highlighted many key areas where changes tend to converge – internal organizations, relations with external stakeholders, and distribution of competencies (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann, 2016). Among the most important of these are internal changes in the local government and the governance of local governments. Although initially (in the 1990s), many governance changes were inspired by the New Public Management (hereinafter – NPM) model, their actual impact on local government in continental Europe was limited. In any case, they did not lead to radical transformations (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014). New ways of working and new management practices have been introduced, resulting in a reorganization of structures, processes, human resources, and budget management (Bouckaert and Kuhlmann, 2016). The NPM model reflects the private sector's ideas – how to improve the efficiency and quality of organizations in delivering public services. Thus, if we also look at efforts to improve local governance, the NPM model elements appear in the rationale for reform. Thus, whether these changes will make the local government more responsive to community needs is important. And NPM also stresses the importance of politicians. For example, in local government cases, the mayor as the manager is the one who invests in the prevention of problems, are result oriented and empowers the citizens to participate in the decision-making process and helps to happen or initiate innovations (Hansen, 2011). The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development report on the need to complete the administrative-territorial reform states that it is necessary to implement it in order to provide better quality and more cost-effective services to the population, to be able to further decentralize public administration by transferring certain public administration functions to local governments and to increase the responsibility of local governments for managing their territory (VARAM, 2019). Thus, also in the case of Latvia, it can be observed that the justification of the need for amalgamation reforms in 2009 and 2021 contained elements from the NPM.

Moreover, another area where changes during local government reform may converge is the distribution of competencies and functions between government levels and institutions. In addition, the essential factor is local power and consensus-building dynamics, which includes stakeholders, party competition and vote or office-seeking aspect, the influence of the media and the use/instrumentalisation of democratic participation tools. Each can function as a game changer concerning reform outcomes. Also, it is essential to look at the administrative system and culture, the initial status of the local gov-

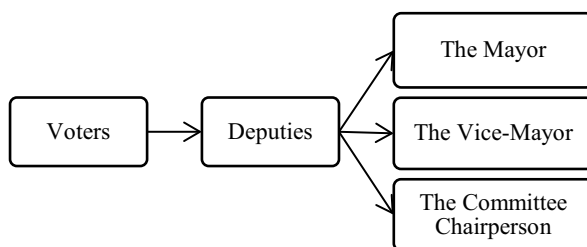
ernment before the reform and reforms in the past, reform implementation strategy, political incentives and political steering of the reform process, the existing resources and performance level in the future (Ebinger et al., 2019).

Swianiewicz (2014) describes local governments of Latvia as relatively decentralized as they have a broad scope of functions. Their possibility to affect the tax rate is low (the local government can only change the real estate tax rate, but there is no local government tax). Still, financial decentralization (power to control taxes) is shared with the central government. According to the IDEA typology, local government deputies are elected based on a proportional representation list system. Citizens vote for a political party or an association of two or more political parties. Voters have the possibility to cross out or put a “+” for candidates, expressing their opinion on each candidate and thus changing their order in the list. Each local government is a separate constituency, regardless of its size. A threshold of five per cent is set for both local and national elections, which means that lists receiving less than five per cent of the total vote in local government elections are excluded from the allocation of seats. The Sainte Laguë method is used to allocate local council seats between lists (Saeima, 1994).

There is collective leadership, as the local council deputies (Figure 1) vote for the candidate for the mayor’s position.

Based on the mayor’s influence, Mouritzen and Svava (2002) have identified four municipal models: 1) The Council-manager form; 2) The Collective form; 3) The Committee-leader form; 4) The Strong-mayor form. According to them, there is the committee-leader type in Latvian municipalities (Figure 1). The mayor does not hold the most powerful position due to not being directly elected. However, there is a need to stress out that this typology examines the distribution of roles and functions among the mayor, deputies, commissions, and the local government’s administration within the framework of horizontal relations. Like the executive director and vice-chairperson, the deputies also elect the mayor. Therefore, it is evident that the mayors may not be influential if one is evaluating horizontal relations as they are not directly elected and their executive functions are largely shared with other actors in the municipality, such as the executive director, deputies, and committee chairperson.

Figure 1. The procedure for the election of local government political positions



Source: own.

However, the local council and voters' choice is mostly the same, as the deputy elected as mayor usually receives the most votes and "+". For example, in the elections of 2021, deputies who received the most "+" and votes in local council elections were mainly elected as mayors. 80 % of all the elected mayors were the ones who received the most "+" in the 2021 local government elections (author's calculations).

Peripheral political mobilization against central political institutions is emerging as a new trend in several European nations, albeit in various political forms. The persistence of regionalism demonstrates the inadequacy of national integration and a regional absence of trust in national governmental processes. As a result, tension between the national level and local authorities could appear, complicating processes where the relationship between these two powers is crucial. For example, during a discussion about financial equalization or distribution of funds (Stein et al., 2022) and also during the top-down reform process.

One of the reasons for territorial amalgamation, which is not related to economics, is that bigger local governments decide and administrate more (important) decisions. It is argued that as a result, the interest in political participation increases too (Ebinger et al., 2019). However, the impact on voter turnout is complex and influenced by various factors. The size of a municipality has a medium- to long-term effects, as larger municipalities may have more extensive powers. On the other hand, the effects of amalgamation, such as citizens' reactions to the merger and their perceptions of representation loss or gaining critical mass, are more immediate. Consequently, voter turnout is influenced by many factors, especially in the elections following the merger (Bolgherini and Paparo, 2023). While some argue that amalgamation leads to increased interest in political participation, other authors have reached different conclusions. Stein et al. (2022) suggest that structural reforms, including mergers, can lead to a decline in trust and affect political and social involvement. Additionally, Simon Lapointe et al. (2018) found that the merge of local governments resulted in a substantial decrease in voter turnout and political efficacy. These effects were particularly pronounced in smaller municipalities, indicating that the impacts of mergers on turnout and efficacy are significant and policy-relevant. Similar findings in Denmark by Y. Bhatti and K. M. Hansen (2019) suggest the potential generalizability of these results to other countries using open-list proportional representation in local elections. Therefore, while territorial amalgamation is a widespread trend, it is important to consider the combined effects of factors such as municipality size, amalgamation, citizens' reactions, and perceptions of representation loss or gain, as they influence voter turnout, especially in the initial post-merger election.

Kjaer et al. (2010) point out that amalgamations have led to an increase in the perceived influence of leading councilors vis-à-vis back-bench councilors and a decrease in the perceived influence of the council vis-à-vis its top administrative officers. This research also displays the role of the mayor in territorial amalgamation. Other research indicates that the electorate punished local parties at the polls for implementing amalgamations decided by the central

government. However, the effect on the mayoral parties' electoral results is more indirect than direct (Kjaer and Klemmensen, 2015). This is the reason why mayors are mostly against territorial amalgamation. Some articles suggest that the political parties holding the mayoralty in times of amalgamations tend to designate very tenured mayors as candidates, thus missing the positive first-term incumbency effect, which a new mayor could have acquired (Tavares, 2018). In this article, I will test whether these assumptions can also be observed in the case of Latvia.

### **3 Methods**

This article is based on quantitative method (data analysis) to evaluate the mayor's role in the territorial amalgamation process. As a matter of research design and method applied, this work focuses on the mayor's role and relationship between involved stakeholders in the territorial amalgamation process in Latvia. Case studies commonly afford multiple observations of a single case, so providing firmer evidence of the factual accuracy of a given proposition would be possible in the analogous cross-unit study (Gerring, 2004).

The conceptual frame (Figure 2) includes not only mayor and its position in the process but also other stakeholders involved in the territorial amalgamation process, as they are behind the actions. These other stakeholders will be discussed in the results section. There is a need to look at all local governments affected by the amalgamation process and also at those that the territorial amalgamation process did not affect, as they will give an overall picture of the trends. In total, fifteen local governments (if we add the capital city) were unaffected by territorial amalgamation reform in 2021, so there were no changes in the composition or boundaries of the local government (Valsts, 2021). In order to compare and to see whether there is divergence of trends between amalgamated and non-amalgamated municipalities, the quasi-experimental design will be used. A quasi-experimental design is chosen as it is not possible to randomly select the units of analysis for the experimental and control groups (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016). According to A. Gendźwiłł et al. (2021), quasi-experimental method is a more precise to analyze causal relationship, when evaluating different local governments, in comparison to cross-sectional studies. A quasi-experiment has control group, and pre- and post-treatment group (Blom-Hansen et al., 2016). In this case, the pre-treatment group consists of the 104 local governments, which were merged after territorial amalgamation and formed treatment group, which consists of 28 local governments (Table 1). The control group consists of 14 local governments before and after the territorial amalgamation. To understand the change of local governments after territorial amalgamation, the local government population is added. The local government population changed a lot in the amalgamated local governments (the treatment group).

Table 1. Size of local governments in control group and treatment group before and after territorial amalgamation

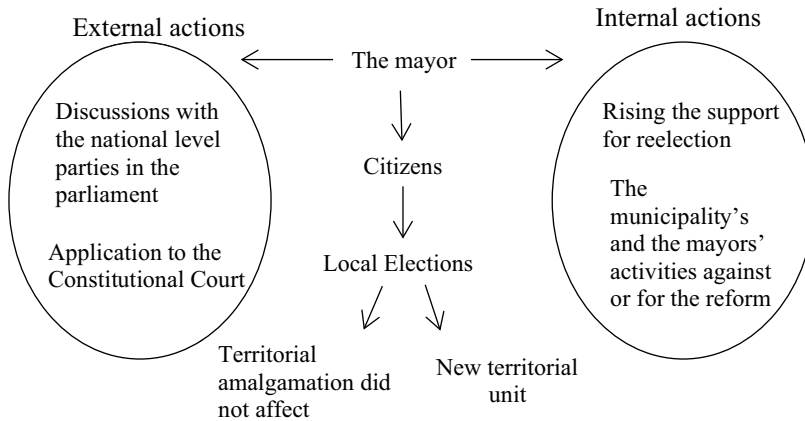
Population size	Control group		Treatment group	
	Prereform	Postreform	Prereform (pretreatment)	Postreform
Under 30000	9	9	103	15
30000-60000	3	3	1	13
More than 60000	2	2	0	0
<b>Total</b>	14	14	104	28

Source: calculated by author.

First, to understand the mayor's role in the local government reform process, there is a need to analyse Latvia's latest administrative-territorial reform process, thus understanding how long it took to finish the territorial amalgamation process and what kind of stakeholders were involved. Secondly, it is also necessary to understand the end result of the reform process and, at the same time, the starting point of the new territorial units, i.e. whether the reform had an impact on voter turnout, how party turnout changed and what the election results were. This also includes looking at how these results have influenced the mayor. To evaluate the territorial amalgamation results, the above described quasi-experimental method will be used. In addition, whether there have been changes between the merged local governments and those that were not. Thirdly, to evaluate the mayor's role and the relations between central and local authorities, it is necessary to look at the external and internal actions. External actions will be understood as activities that the mayor and the council did outside the local government to affect the territorial amalgamation process. Internal actions will be understood as activities that the mayor and the council did inside of the local government, for example, what was the message to the citizens of the local government, did they organize meetings, consultations or surveys about the planned reform. Mayors opinion were collected from official state institution web pages, local governments' official web pages and local newspaper web pages during the period between April 2019 and October 2021.



Figure 2. The conceptual analysis frame

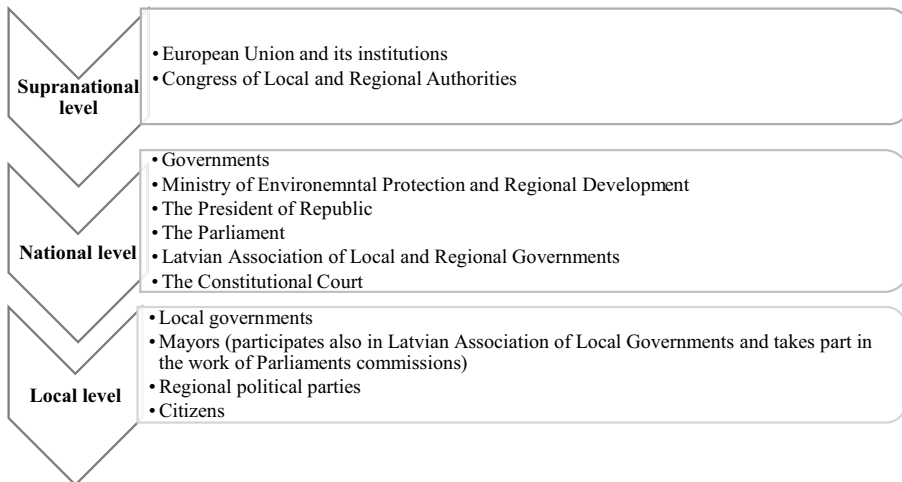


Source: made by the author.

## 4 Results

There have been involved many stakeholders from different kinds of decision-making levels (Figure 3) in the 2021 territorial amalgamation process.

Figure 3. Stakeholders in territorial reform in Latvia



Source: own.

It is necessary to focus attention and identify the stakeholders so that their roles can be better understood in the amalgamation process and the relationship between them—especially the mayor's place in the net of stakeholders. In 2015, the MEPRD proposed to reduce the number of local governments significantly. One proposed option was to reduce the number of local governments from 119 to 49 while retaining nine State cities. However, at that

exact moment, there was no political will to introduce this reform. However, it changed when in the declaration of the Cabinet of Ministers on the planned activities, written in early 2019, a commitment was declared to implement the territorial amalgamation reform by 2021. The plan from the beginning was to make all district centers that existed before 2009 the centers of the new districts, with seven State cities (except Riga and Jurmala) merging with their surrounding neighbourhoods. For example, the number of local governments in the territory of the former Riga District was to be reduced from 16 to 6. The Cabinet of Ministers approved the draft law, which envisages the establishment of 39 administrative territories – 5 State cities (Daugavpils, Jurmala, Liepaja, Rezekne and Riga) and 34 districts. However, the number changed during long discussions in the Parliament.

Before discussions in the Parliament, there were 28 public consultations in 2019 and 2020. The public consultation aim was to involve the public in the process of local government reform and explain the implementation of the reform and changes related to the new administrative-territorial division. The Minister and/or representatives of the Ministry took part in this consultation and listened to local MPs, citizens and businesses. However, at the end of 2019, there was a fact-finding visit by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe rapporteurs to Latvia to clarify the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments' allegations that there have been violations of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Moreover, the rapporteurs expressed concern about the administrative territorial process, lack of proper public consultation, and reduced financial autonomy of local governments (Cadoret and Cools, 2020).

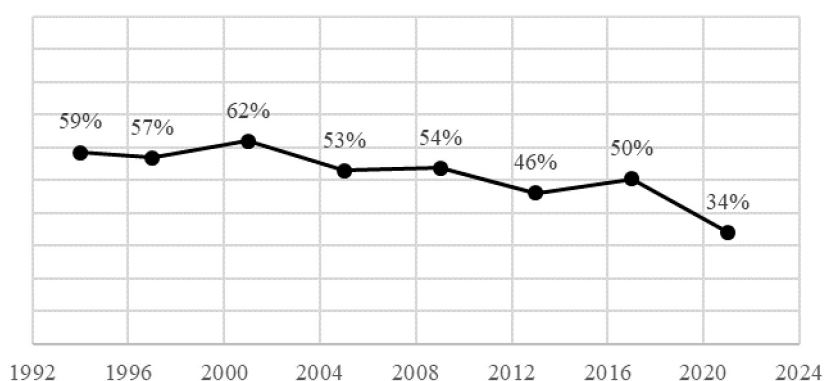
A specially established parliamentary commission – the Commission on Administrative and Territorial Reform, examined the draft law. It was found at the end of 2019. And its work lasted until the middle of 2022. It was set up to examine the draft Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas and other draft laws and issues related to territorial reform and its implementation (Saeima, 2019). However, all the time, there was Public Administration and Local Government Committee. The draft law was discussed at 22 committee meetings. Representatives of the local governments involved in the reform were invited. However, as the minutes of the Committee show, there were also meetings at which the invited representatives of the local governments did not speak or comment on the planned changes. In addition, in almost every committee meeting, there were representatives from the Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments and other NGOs representing cities or employers. It can therefore be concluded that representatives of local governments had the opportunity to participate in the public consultation and the parliamentary committee's work. In addition, the opportunity was taken to involve international experts to evaluate these participatory measures.

On 23 June 2020, new Law on Administrative Territories and Settlements were announced. From now on, the cities of the Republic of Latvia are divided into State cities and cities. The State cities are Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jekabpils,

Jurmala, Liepaja, Ogre, Rezekne, Riga, Valmiera and Ventspils (three of which are not separated will be local governments but are part of the counties as units of territorial division) (Saeima, 2020). 1 July 2021, there was the transition to 43 local governments, which includes 7 State cities and 35 local governments, many of which were created on the territories of former districts.

Recent electoral statistics suggest that the assumption that participation would be lower in newly created local governments due to unfamiliar political environments and candidates, insufficient emotional attachment to the new territorial formation, and inadequate information about the current affairs of the local government is supported. The voter turnout was 34,01 % (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Voter turnout for local elections in Latvia, 1994-2021



Source: Central Election Commission.

The data suggest that introducing newly created local governments led to a slight decrease in voter turnout. The average participation rate in the 14 local governments (without the capital city) whose boundaries were unchanged was 34.93 %, while in 2017, the average participation rate in these municipalities was 45.38 % (Table 2). While the difference in the same year is minimal, the difference between the election year of 2017, indicate that introducing new local governments can have a negative impact on voter turnout if we compare how it was before the merger. This could be due to a lack of awareness of the changes, difficulties understanding the system, or lack of motivation to participate in the newly created local government elections.

Table 2. Voter turnout (%) of local governments in control group and treatment group before and after territorial amalgamation

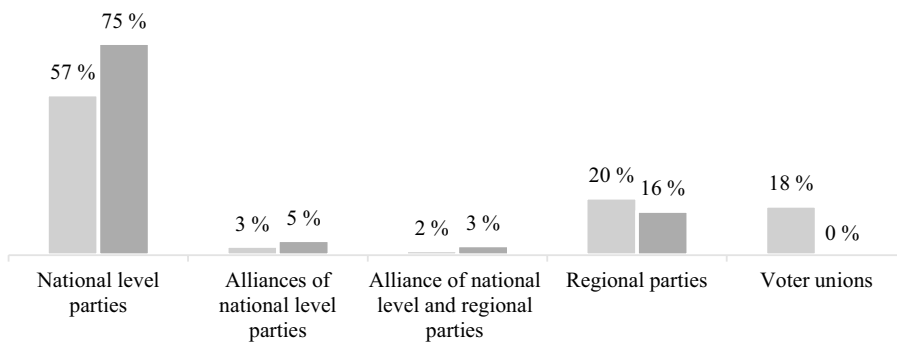
	Control group		Treatment group	
	Prereform	Postreform	Prereform (pretreatment)	Postreform
Voter turnout				
Average voter turnout	45.38 %	34.93 %	48.66 %	34.98 %

Source: calculated by author.

In the context of low turnout, it is also important to focus on trust before and after the reform. In 2020, 33.9% of the population trusted or partially trusted local governments, and 25.2 % trusted or partially trusted the parliament (SKDS, 2020). In 2021, after the reform was adopted, 22.2 % trusted or partially trusted the parliament and 54.4 % trusted local governments (Krautmanis, 2022). Perhaps one of the reasons the trust to local governments grew was that some of the mayors and councils were submitting the applications to the Constitutional Court. In addition, the important role of local governments in containing the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic and in providing support measures to citizens and entrepreneurs could also have boosted trust (MK, 2021; LR VK, 2022).

To understand the overall situation, it is essential to examine whether the participation from national-level and regional parties increased. In the 2021 elections, national-level parties mainly participated in the local government elections. Still, the regional parties also participate, and even one could conclude that bigger local governments can develop regional parties and boost their participation in them. There were 318 lists submitted to local elections in 2021, but 65 parties were participating, of which 25 were regional ones (Figure 5). And in 2017, there were 588 lists submitted to local elections, but 178 parties and voter unions were participating. There were no local governments, where only regional parties participated. Still, 20 % of local governments participated only the national-level parties and/or alliances of national-level parties, where the election happened on 5 June 2021. As of the elections in 2021, there were no voter unions as there was the decision to exclude them from the law.

**Figure 5. Percentage of the number of total lists in the 2021 Latvian local elections (national, alliances of national-level parties, alliances of national and regional parties and regional parties)**



Source: Central Election Commission and Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

The Control group has few pre-territorial reform electoral alliances, as it is predominantly composed of national cities, where national parties, their alliances or their alliances with regional parties submit more lists (Table 3). The data in the Table 3 suggests that territorial amalgamation had a positive impact on the popularity of national level parties. However, there can be a

discussion about the trust in the national level parties, who are mostly also represented in the parliament, and the low turnout in the 2021 local government elections.

**Table 3. Percentage of lists in local governments in control group and treatment group before and after territorial amalgamation by type**

Lists	Control group		Treatment group	
	Prereform	Postreform	Prereform (pretreatment)	Postreform
National level parties	53 %	71 %	58 %	76 %
Alliances of national level parties	4 %	6 %	3 %	5 %
Alliance of national and regional parties	4 %	4 %	1 %	3 %
Regional parties	36 %	18 %	17 %	15 %
Voter Unions	3 %	(None in 2021)	20 %	(None in 2021)
Total number of lists	98	93	490	237

Source: calculated by author.

During the process of administrative territorial reform in May 2020, a citizen survey conducted by the research centre SKDS revealed that 36 % of the population supports the reform, while 33 % are against it, with 31 % of respondents remaining undecided. The region of Kurzeme exhibited the most negative attitude towards the reform, with 50 % of respondents opposing it, followed by Pierīga with 39 % expressing a negative opinion. The region of Zemgale had a slightly lower percentage of dissatisfied citizens at 39 %, but also showed 42 % support for the reform. On the other hand, the regions of Vidzeme and Latgale had the highest support for the reform, with 47 % and 45 % of the population, respectively, in favour of it (LETA, 2020). In a previous survey in 2019, prior to the parliamentary discussions, 35 % of respondents supported the reform, while 30 % were against it. Notably, the largest share of reform supporters was found among the 64-75 age group, with 41 % in favour and only 28 % opposed. Higher levels of support were also observed among those with higher education (38 %) and middle (41 %) or high (42 %) incomes (LETA, 2019a). However, a growing phenomenon is the increasing portion of the population that does not have a clear opinion, which is also evident in surveys related to elections and voter preferences, as well as a lack of interest in participating in local government elections (Zute-Vītola and Važnaja, 2022). Local surveys conducted by various municipalities, such as Ikšķile, Jaunpils, Rucava, Rūjiena, Naukšēni, Jaunnjelgava, Lielvārde, and Rauna, demonstrated different levels of support for the merger plans (Mače, 2019; LETA, 2019b; Valmieras Ziņas, 2019; Matisone, 2019; TVNET/LETA, 2019; LETA, 2019c; Vid-

zemes televīzija, 2019). It should be noted that concerns about the validity of these surveys arose when journalists discovered that personal identification documents were not required. Thus, individuals could potentially vote under false names (Kārklīņš, 2019).

To fully evaluate the effect of partisanship and the representation of the mayor in local governments, it is still essential to consider the party affiliation of the mayors. Among 27 merged local governments, the mayor’s party received the most votes in 21 cases. Furthermore, in 21 out of 27 merged local governments (78 %), the elected mayor was the deputy who received the most “+” from the voters (Table 4). Similarly, in 82 out of 104 merged local governments in 2017 (79 %), the elected mayor was the deputy who received the most “+” from the voters. In addition, if we do not look into whether these municipalities were merged or not, the trend that the deputy who receives the most + from voters is elected in the mayor position is quite high – 78 % in 2017 and 81 % in 2021. Data in the table suggests that merging local governments did not significantly affect the outcomes of the choice of mayor in the case of Latvia. In both merged and non-merged local governments, the elected mayor was mostly the deputy who received the most votes. This implies that the merging of local governments was not influential in determining who would get the mayor’s position. When considering both the most popular mayors (based on the “+”) and their position as having the most seats in the Council, in the treatment group, it dropped from 74% to 70%. This suggests that the reform may have influenced the relationship between the most popular mayors and their political influence, as measured by the number of seats they held in the Council. A. Tavares (2018) said that parties usually chose very tenured mayors as candidates. This, in some part, is also the case in Latvia, where in 24 of 42 (57 %) local governments, there was the same mayor as before the territorial amalgamation. Mayors changed in 16 local governments, which constitutes 38 %.

**Table 4. Percentage of mayors with most “+” in local governments in control group and treatment group before and after territorial amalgamation**

	Control group		Treatment group	
	Prereform	Postreform	Prereform (pretreatment)	Postreform
Mayors with most “+”	79 %	87 %	79 %	78 %
Mayors with most “+” and most seats in the Council	79 %	80 %	74 %	70 %
Total number of local governments	14	15	104	27

Source: calculated by author.

#### **4.1 Where were the mayors during the territorial amalgamation and after it?**

H. Wollmann (2008) believes that the reform debate in Europe is taking place because of widespread criticism of transparency and accountability in local government, followed by low participation in local elections, as local governments are less and less able to respond to the social, economic and environmental complexities and challenges. Consequently, these challenges also call for different solutions from the mayor as a local leader and possibly a different decision-making process to increase participation and improve transparency and responsible use of financial resources. I have looked into the decision-making process and what opportunities there were for the mayor to communicate with parliament and the ministry. However, as territorial amalgamation reforms are not related only to the administration of local government but also can affect service delivery and local communities, it is important to look at what mayors said to the voters about reform and whether they explained it or criticised it. Therefore, this subsection examines the mayors who actively expressed their thoughts about territorial amalgamation. All the opinions of mayors, who have spoken publicly, have been shared and published on the local government's or regional newspaper's websites. For example, mayors of Jaunpils, Engure, and Kandava actively expressed their thoughts about territorial amalgamation. All of these local governments were merged and added to Tukuma novads.

The Mayor of Jaunpils said that reform is needed, but there are many ifs. He was worried about school closure, service delivery and money access. He also expresses the idea that there should be a referendum about territorial amalgamation. Also, the Mayor of Engure doesn't see many advantages of reform.

"In the end, I see practically no benefits. On the contrary, power will move away from the people. The one wish is for people to live better. But without listening to each other, it is unlikely to happen." (Reinsone and Trēde, 2019)

The Mayor of Kandava also was against reform and expressed the same thoughts against reform. He highlights the importance of local patriotism. Says that economically it will be wrong but at the same time says that the only advantage would be the possibility to make a loan:

"In this case, it is seen only in the ability to borrow or to engage in large EU projects that are sometimes unaffordable for smaller local governments with smaller budgets." (Reinsone and Trēde, 2019)

These opinions were collected on a regional news portal before the vote in the Parliament. Given that these were local governments, which were added to a larger one, the position of the council presidents is clear. However, one of the mayors still takes the opposite view on attracting funding and points to significant benefits for the local government's development.

The mayors of four local governments – Jelgava, Daugavpils, Ventspils and Rēzekne, were united in favour of sending a public letter to the President

of Latvia, Prime Minister, Latvian Association of Local and Regional Governments, the Latvian Academy of Sciences and the Parliament. These local governments had an appeal to stop the territorial reform in its current form as developed by the MEPRD. Representing four administrative-territorial units covering rural areas without towns, they state that they want a democratic and unhurried reform implementation. They stressed the need to respect the principle of voluntarism and assess what has and has not been achieved in the local governments so far. There was a need for a clear vision of the criteria for attracting funding in the “post-reform” period (Rēzeknes novads, 2019). This finding indicates that the mayors of four local governments in Latvia are united in opposition to the current form of the MEPRD’s territorial reform.

Before the administrative-territorial reform, mayors made collective and individual attempts to halt the reform. A separate section about activities against administrative-territorial reform has been made on Iecavas’ local governments’ online page. For example, a public consultation was published with the question, “Do you support the preservation of Iecava local government as an independent administrative territory of the Republic of Latvia?” The Mayor of Iecava opened the consultation meeting with the following text:

“We don’t want to live worse, but we will if we are added to Bauska local government. ... So far, all the MEPRD has to offer are figures and statistics. But this is not what interests the inhabitants of our local government. What is needed are arguments that can genuinely show that living conditions in the local government will improve after the reform.” (Iecava, 2019a).

Through this questionnaire and introduction, he clearly shows his attitude towards administrative-territorial reform. Iecava was one of those territorial units that were added to Bauskas novads (Iecava, 2019b).

There is a need to note that Vecpiebalgas novads were added to Cēsu novads. Also, Vecpiebalgas’s mayor expressed mostly negative connotations towards the work of the MEPRD minister. However, he mentions that he supports the reform and doesn’t deny its necessity.

There has also been demission from the mayors’ position as a protest against this reform. For example, Beverīnas mayor announced about demission because:

“The reform is probably necessary to some extent, but the way it is being carried out is unacceptable.” (Leta, 2019d)

Again, he is one of the mayors who say that reform is needed to some extent, but he does not accept how it is carried out. Beverīna were also added to Valmieras novads.

After the territorial amalgamation, there was a meeting with the new minister of MEPRD about the situation in local governments. The Mayor of Bauska pointed out that:



“After the reform, Bauska region is one of the largest local governments in Latvia and is a big challenge for deputies and employees. Moreover, it turned out that there are huge differences between the merged local governments. This includes population density - not only between towns and local governments, but also, for example, between Kurmene, where there are five people per square kilometer, and Īsliče, where there are 33 people per square kilometer.” (Varnevičs, 2021)

The thoughts of territorial amalgamation ranged from support to opposition between the mayors who expressed their opinions on the territorial amalgamation. The majority of mayors who have voiced their opinions have expressed opposition to the reform, citing concerns such as school closures, difficulties in accessing services and economic reasons, and even a lack of local patriotism. There is also a general sentiment among the mayors that the reform is necessary to some extent but that the current form of the reform needs to be revised. In the 2022 autumn, there were Parliament elections before which some parties in election campaigns said that they would look into the territorial reform process and how effective it is so as to know whether there is a need to change it.

## **4.2 The aftermath of territorial amalgamations**

After the law was adopted (on 10 June 2020) in the Parliament, several local governments challenged the administrative-territorial reform in the Constitutional Court. Specifically, the Law on Administrative Territories and Populated Areas has been challenged in Constitutional court by 21 local government councils, which compared to territorial reform in 2009, is way more. In 2009, there were 4 cases (Satversmes tiesa, 2009). Currently, 19 cases have been initiated in the Constitutional Court, two decisions on refusal to initiate a claim have been adopted, and several cases have been merged (Satversmes tiesa 2021). This is important to look at because the mayor is the one who represents the local government and can initiate to submit an application to the Constitutional Court. Of course, local government deputies have to vote on whether they accept this application submission in the council meeting and decide that the mayor will be authorised to represent the local government in the application preparation. In addition, while evaluating the mayor's role in the territorial amalgamation process, another important aspect is that they can decide when to convene the council meeting and set the agenda.

On 12 March 2021, the Constitutional Court recognised that the local governments' annexation of Skulte novads to Saulkrasti novads and its separation from Limbazi novads was unconstitutional. Following this judgement, also a separate Varaklani novads was established. As a result, the elections in Varaklani and Rezekne were postponed until 11 September 2021. During this decision-making process, mayors have had the opportunity to speak up. For example, the residents of Limbazi protested against incorporating Skulte and Vidrīzi parishes into Saulkrasti. Despite several thousand residents' signatures, the Saeima did not fully hear the residents' objections and decided to separate Skulte from Limbazi. The local government contested this decision

in the Constitutional Court, which ruled that the annexation of the local government to Saulkrasti was arbitrary and not in accordance with the law (TV3 Ziņas, 2021).

The mayors can play a significant role in the territorial amalgamation process. Through their authority to initiate applications to the Constitutional Court, convene council meetings, and set the agenda, mayors can help ensure that residents' voices are heard and that local governments can challenge decisions if there are legal grounds.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

This article presented an analysis of the role of the mayor in the territorial amalgamation process in Latvia. This paper aimed to evaluate how and whether the mayor participates in the reform process if it affects their local governments.

It is evident that a significant number of mayors, whose local governments is merged with others, strongly oppose the plan of territorial amalgamation. Additionally, following the amalgamation, negative connotations have emerged as mayors grapple with evaluating the financial situation of their newly merged local governments. G. Ó. Erlingsson et al. (2021) emphasize that the argument for coercive amalgamations based on economies of scale is difficult to justify in research. However, as indicated in the literature review, the effects of the amalgamation process can be observed relatively quickly, while the full impact of the changes in the municipality may take longer to manifest. Thus, to comprehensively evaluate the aftermath of this reform in Latvia, it is prudent to allow for additional time.

It is vital to see to what extent there was the involvement and analysis of documents, functions and possibilities to participate in the decision-making process during the territorial amalgamation process. To evaluate the role of the mayor in territorial amalgamation, interviews cannot be conducted, and the position of the opinions is evident, especially for those that are added to other ones. Moreover, participation in local elections between newly created local governments and not merged ones in Latvia is the same.

Finally, mayors representing local governments, which were planned to be merged, can express their concerns during public consultation, which MEPRD organized, and during the parliamentary committee meetings. However, there were times when these public consultations were just formal ones or mayors did not take full advantage of the opportunities. It is more difficult to influence the territorial amalgamation process if it is top-down. However, if the local community clearly expresses different attitudes, there are tools for mayors to affect it. For example, one of the platforms that the mayor has to affect territorial reform are NGO's which represent municipalities. Additionally, the Constitutional Court did affect the look of the map of planned local governments in the case of Latvia.

To fully understand the role of the mayor in the territorial amalgamation process, it is essential to look at the context. The mayor is one of the many stakeholders involved in the territorial amalgamation process, and that not always stay in office when the new territorial reform is introduced after elections.

There was no firm evidence that the interest in political participation increases if there are bigger local governments, as they need to decide and administer more decisions.

The tools that mayors used to influence the process were media, public consultations, public letters and even demission. In addition, an important democratic participation tool was used after the law regarding local government amalgamation was adopted – application to the Constitutional Court. However, the application to the Constitutional Court can be considered the last possibility for mayors to change the law. Despite that there is collective leadership, there is still evidence that mostly those deputies who receive the most votes and “+” are indirectly elected as mayors.

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