

# Small is beautiful?

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*Lessons from a decade of decentralisation in Antwerp*

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## Abstract

This discussion paper analyses the intra-municipal decentralisation process in Antwerp and evaluates the working of the districts, since their first direct election in 2000. Although scientific evidence is relatively limited and we often had to make judgements through a glass darkly, we nevertheless build on a number of important indicators to conclude that districts did not fulfil the expectations of increasing democracy and efficiency, set out by their initiators. They did not seem to bring politics closer to citizens, or citizens closer to politics for that matter. The competences of the districts are few and largely advisory. However, coordination issues as well as spillover effects limit the prospects for further decentralisation. We attribute this relative failure in part to the misfit between the district boundaries and the socio-demographic fabric of the city. We also believe that the creation of districts is an institutional and rigid answer to the dynamic and fluid problem of political alienation. We therefore argue that direct participation, neighbourhood-based as well as project-based, may be an attractive alternative to districts. The ideal would be to have strong neighbourhoods in a strong city.

The question what Brussels could learn from Antwerp needs to be answered cautiously, as the context is partially different. Brussels has for instance a larger scale and a more complex political landscape. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, two points come to mind. First, it seems that if anything, the strengthening of the city government at the level of the region of Brussels should be considered. Antwerp, but also Ghent, benefited a lot from a strong city government that could govern at a scale that mostly coincides with the sociological city. Although we do not think the districts have been a great success in the Antwerp context, it could be a step forward for Brussels governance to reform the current 19 Brussels communes in the direction of the Antwerp district model. In the Brussels context this would imply an important strengthening of the city government at the regional level, while not entirely dismissing the local dimension that still seems crucial to Brussels politics at the moment. But secondly, Brussels could also simultaneously look at the participatory approaches that connect citizens with policy and politics beyond elections. Instead of decentralising, Ghent chose to organise participation in neighbourhoods using city staff with direct access to power in the city. The aim should be to combine the best of both worlds; political decisiveness through representation and accountability at a level that is relevant for policies (i.e. the sociological city), and involvement of citizens at a level that is relevant for citizens as users of the city (i.e. the neighbourhood).

## Introduction

Few informed observers would disagree with the fact that city of Antwerp has witnessed some important improvements in the past years. This comes to a good extent to the credit of the city governance, which combined higher professionalism with appealing projects of city development such as a new museum (the MAS), a large park (Park Spoor Noord) and the surroundings of the central station. Also the new mayor of Antwerp, Bart De Wever, explicitly pointed to the merits of the previous government in running the city. Antwerp (but also Ghent) is a case in point of the positive effects that can follow from a strong city government with a proactive attitude of politicians.

A decade ago, the city of Antwerp also introduced districts that took over some of the competences of the city. Yet, few evaluations of that enterprise have been made. Starting from the history of the decentralisation process in Antwerp, we subsequently ask whether the districts fulfil the expectations that were set out by their initiators in the past. We ask ourselves whether the creation of a directly elected political tier within the city has brought politics closer to citizens. We also ask whether decentralisation of (some) competences to the districts, has improved effective governance. Whether there are coordination issues or spillover effects. We further look at alternatives for districts, and pay particular attention to the approach of Ghent. Although we would like to leave it to the reader to draw parallels between Brussels and Antwerp, we conclude by giving some tentative suggestions.

## The history of decentralisation in Antwerp

On March 11th 1997, the Belgian senate approved a reform of article 41 of the Belgian constitution, enabling so-called 'intra-municipal decentralisation' ('binnengemeentelijke decentralisatie'). From then on, municipalities with a minimum of 100 000 inhabitants could take the initiative to install 'intra-municipal decentralised organs', composed of directly elected members. Subsequently, other relevant national and regional laws (including a transfer of competence to the regions) were changed to take away the further obstacles for decentralisation and to determine the exact functioning of the decentralised organs, which were given the name of 'districts'.

The only Belgian municipality that has used this possibility up to this day is the city of Antwerp. The other Flemish cities of more than 100 000 inhabitants (Ghent and Brugge) have shown no interest and the Walloon and Brussels region have not even taken the initiative to adopt the necessary regional legislation to pursue intra-municipal decentralisation. This is not surprising, as the constitutional reform and the whole legislative procedure in the national and regional parliament were carried through exclusively on the demand of Antwerp representatives, to respond to an Antwerp 'issue'.

### The proto-decentralisation

This issue had existed since (at least) January 1st 1983. This is when the merger of Antwerp and the surrounding municipalities of Deurne, Berchem, Borgerhout, Merksem, Wilrijk, Hoboken and (almost all of) Ekeren was ultimately enacted. In fact, the rest of the enormous merger of municipalities in Belgium (from 2359 to 596) had been carried

through six years earlier, but the complexity of the operation in Antwerp resulted in postponement of 6 years (Van Assche & Buts, 2004: 38). The new municipality of Antwerp ultimately became the largest in Belgium, with 490.524 inhabitants (Bertels et al, 2011: 50-51).

The delay in the execution can be seen as symbolic for how the fusion was perceived among at least part of Antwerp's political class. During the first meeting of the new city council of 'Greater-Antwerp' in January 1983, concerns were voiced that the operation was democratically questionable, as it would make the distance between the City Hall and the inhabitants of the city too large. However, criticism on the new scale of governance also concerned the fact that the new merged city did still not cover the entire socio-economic agglomeration and was still not economically and financially sustainable (Van Assche & Buts, 2004: 40). While the fusion had in part made the city financially healthier, this had not sufficed to solve Antwerp's fundamental financial problems, aggravated by the economic crisis of the 1980's (Beyen et al, 2011: 102). As mayor Bob Cools summarized it: Antwerp was too large for the small and too small for the large.

This double concern would remain present in the Antwerp (de)centralisation debate for years to come (Van Assche & Buts: 40). Clearly, however, the first concern was much more coherently and quickly met with political action. Right from the start in 1983, a number of decisions limited the scope of the fusion so as to conserve the 'individuality and visibility' of the previously independent municipalities. Nine districts with their own councils were created, which had as official goals to keep contact with citizens and local organisations, thus also compensating for the fact that districts were not represented proportionally in the city council. They got their seat in the old town halls, where as much as possible of the services to citizens were located. While this could be seen as recognising the separate identity of the former peripheral municipalities, it could also be interpreted as a way to bring the City to these municipalities and thus reinforcing their unity with the city (Beyen et al, 2011: 101). Another role that was ascribed to the district councils was that of an 'antenna', a signaling function for the city hall to know which were the issues and concerns in the districts (Van Assche & Buts: 44).

However, Antwerp could not give the district councils any decision power, since article 41 of the Constitution stipulated that it was not possible to delegate the full competence of the council for issues of municipal interest. The district councils therefore became mere advisory bodies for a number of restricted matters. As they had no instruments to ensure that their advices would be taken seriously, this was often not the case in practice (Van Assche & Buts: 41-44).

The district councils could also not be elected directly. They were therefore largely composed on the basis of the number of votes a party had gained in the municipal elections, based on the Imperiali system (favouring larger parties) which is also used for municipal elections. The district councils were composed by the political groups in the City Council which all proposed their own candidates and could also replace 'their' councillors at any moment. Next to these 'real members', every political group in the municipal council also appointed one extra city councillor per district that had to represent the group in the district council, officially so as to assure the exchange of information between the municipal and district councils. In other words, the composition of the district councils was largely controlled by the political parties at the

city level. The district councils appointed a 'bureau', composed of a president and two vice-presidents that had to belong to a different party (in 1993 a third vice-president would be added).

The functioning of the districts was quickly met with generalised discontent. Qualitative interviews with aldermen, as well in the city as in the districts showed that this was due to a number of factors (Van Assche & Buts, 2004: 45). There was the lack of relevance, due to the dependence on the city: the district councils only had advisory power and their advices were generally not taken into account by the city college (despite promises of the opposite). The city also did not *ask* for advice. There was also the lack of legitimacy among politicians as well as the population because the political parties appointed the councillors and the composition of the district councils did not reflect the specific election results in the district but only those of the city as a whole.

This negative evaluation fuelled projects of further decentralisation, which were addressed by the new coalition that came into power after the elections of 1994. However, other factors were also at play. In 1994 the extreme right Vlaams Blok became the largest party at the municipal elections with some 28% of the votes. In those days, one of the dominant analysis attributed the success of the extreme right in part to a gap between citizens and politics, leading to an 'anti-political' vote. Specifically in Antwerp, decentralisation was seen by a number of politicians as a way to make the distance smaller between the people living in Antwerp and those governing them. Stopping the rise of the extreme right had also been one of the arguments used by Flemish minister Kelchtermans in 1993, when Antwerp decentralisation was for the first time officially mentioned as an option on a higher governance level.

The success of the Vlaams Blok also had an indirect effect on the new city college's viewpoint on decentralisation. Due to the success of the Vlaams Blok, a coalition of five parties was needed, including the Greens who had always been a strong defendant of decentralisation. Since the fusion of 1983, they had referred to 'Greater-Antwerp' as 'Far-too-greater-Antwerp'. In addition, the Liberals also pleaded for decentralisation and the Christian-democrats had already been in favour much longer. An element, which also played a role, is that parties that were electorally less strong on the city level, but stronger in some districts also favoured decentralisation out of partisan interests.

The 1994 coalition decided that it would very actively advocate a legal framework on the national and regional level to permit actual decentralisation. But in the meantime, it already tried to attribute a number of competences and financial means to the districts, whose decisions would then still have to be voted by the community council. However, in practice this initiative became more of an administrative deconcentration as the legal framework did not permit much more. The district bureaus became competent to draft a policy note and a note listing priorities. The number of district councillors was raised and city councillors could no longer be appointed.

Besides district formation, the new coalition also announced a debate on 'region formation', referring to closer collaboration with the surrounding municipalities of Antwerp. However, this part of the Antwerp governance debate would not really be addressed, due to lack of political unanimity on the issue: parties that were strongly represented in the peripheral municipalities of Antwerp, such as the Christian-

democrats, had always voiced the reluctance of these municipalities. Although the political consensus on the decentralisation debate seemed to be much greater than the region formation, the actual support for district formation should not be exaggerated. The fact that top politicians of all parties had agreed to make this a priority can somewhat paradoxically also be explained by the fact that the general impression – also among those less favourable to decentralisation – was that the chances of Antwerp being able to get all the necessary legislative work done - including an institutional reform, in the course of one legislature – were very limited. In that sense, it was pretty harmless to call for it. But things would turn out differently.

### **The road to actual intra-municipal decentralisation**

The national legislative procedure was quickly started up, most notably by a proposition for constitutional reform, introduced by five Antwerp senators (one per party in the Antwerp coalition). It happened that the article that had to be revised had been opened for revision by the previous federal government. The headquarters of the Flemish parties had to be convinced, as well as the francophone parties, who saw no real interest in this constitutional change. However, with five parties behind the proposition, as a result of the multi-coloured Antwerp coalition, all necessary national political networks could be activated. It also helped that the senate had just been reformed into a reflection chamber and was looking for material to reflect on (Van Assche & Buts, 2004: 57).

The argumentation used in the complementary documents of the proposed legislation mostly referred to the democratic deficit after the fusion: the distance between citizens and those who govern them allegedly became too large, the transfer of information and the detection of problems and needs diminished and participation of the citizens was lacking. Decentralisation within larger cities was put forward as the answer. More precisely, the constitutional amendment proposed to reform article 41 of the constitution, by inscribing that 'intra-municipal territorial institutions could deal with 'matters of municipal interest'. National and regional laws – with two-thirds majorities – would further have to elaborate the competences, working and election of these institutions. During the course of debates a number of elements were added to the article 41 reform proposal: the direct election of the new organs, the fact that the community council had to take the initiative and that this type of decentralisation was only possible in municipalities of more than 100 000 inhabitants.

Already in March 1997, the constitutional reform was approved by the senate. The rest of the legislative procedure (including a delegation of competence to the regions through a special majority law and changes to the municipal law, electoral laws and regional laws) also went quite quickly, the last hurdle being taken on June 30th 1999 with the publication of the Flemish regional laws in the Belgian Monitor. During the course of the national legislative procedure a number of important decisions were taken. The decentralised organs were officially called districts (referring to the legislation on the civil registry ). Regional laws activated this national legislation.

There was still some criticism in the Flemish parliament however. Surprisingly, one of the previous advocates of decentralisation in the Antwerp city council, the Liberal Ward Beysen, pleaded against, on the basis of arguments such as that the fusion in Antwerp may have been difficult but had now been accepted, the old municipal frontiers that

would be used were out of date, non-Antwerp representatives would just vote the reform without knowledge of the local situation, deconcentration of services would be a better option, decentralisation went against the necessary scale enlargement that should be achieved through the creation of a larger metropolitan area, it hampered the unity of governance in the city and (somewhat surprisingly) that the extreme right might be able to get into power in one of the districts. In the end, the regional law was voted with unanimity, except for three abstentions.

Following the national and regional legislation, the Antwerp city council enabled decentralisation in December 1999. The official goals that were formulated mostly concerned democracy (by having more councillors the contact with citizens can be repaired, the participation and dialogue of citizens can be improved) and efficiency (improvement of direct and indirect service ('dienstverlening') and subsidiarity through the realisation of local interests). During the debates and through interviews with politicians that had worked on the decentralisation issue a number of other motivations for decentralisation came to light. One of them is the relation between politics and civil service: it would enable a larger control on the civil service and reinforce local decision-making through replacing civil servants by politicians as decision-makers on local issues. Many within the administration were therefore not very enthusiastic about decentralisation (Van Assche & Buts, 2004: 55-56). Some latent goals, according to some, were to provide in jobs for politicians who did not get elected, or who were not trusted with higher impact positions by the political parties.

What clearly also played a role was the position of the extreme right. By bringing politics closer to citizens, it was argued, the Vlaams Blok could be stopped. Yet, the Vlaams Blok was very much in favour of decentralisation because it saw a possibility to gain a majority in districts where it was particularly strong. This was in turn also something that worried the majority parties, which was one of the reasons to keep the number of competences of the districts fairly limited. Other reasons for this were scepticism about whether enough qualified political personnel could be found as well as the concern to not generate too many extra costs.

### **Antwerp decentralisation: how it works**

On October 8th 2000, simultaneously with the municipal and provincial elections, Antwerp held direct district elections for the first time. 211 district councillors were elected in the nine districts of which 43 become district college members. Table 1 summarizes the most important characteristics of Antwerp's nine districts. As foreseen in national and regional legislation, the number of district councillors is established at two thirds of the number of municipality councillors that a municipality with as many inhabitants as the district would have. District councillors cannot combine their mandate with a seat in the community council. Somewhat surprisingly, the electoral system used for the district elections is not Imperiali – which is used for the municipalities – but the more proportional D'Hondt system. Out of the district council, a district college with a district president is composed: the number of college members is maximum two thirds of the number of college members that a municipality with as many inhabitants as the district would have, but with a maximum of five.

The legislation left the determination of the competences of the districts to the municipalities. The division of competences could differ per municipality, but not per district within one municipality. An exception is the competence on civil registry 'burgerlijke stand' which was automatically and entirely attributed to the districts by national legislation. A number of competences were also explicitly excluded as potential district competences: municipal budget, taxes, personnel and police tasks. Other competences can be devolved (but also reattributed) by the city council, college or the mayor. In Antwerp, the districts have a number of autonomous decision-making competences. However, these are all shared competences with the city, as the districts are only competent for the district elements. These include public domain, culture, festivities and events, markets, youth, elderly, sports, organisations, traffic, communication, neighbourhood participation ('wijkoverleg') and security policy. Next to these decision-making competences, districts also have advisory competences, concerning all matters that are related to the district, and initiation competences resulting in the possibility to add district competence related issues to the agenda of the city council.

The functioning of the Antwerp district councils and colleges is very similar to that of the municipal council and college. The districts entirely rely on the city administration for the execution of their policies. There is however a number of deconcentrated civil servants, who operate under the district secretary. The city secretary, who also remains the head of the city personnel that works in the districts, appoints the district secretary. The city departments and agencies can be considered as service centres that deliver products and services to the districts. The financial means of the districts come from a city dotation. For specific public works they can also use the 'district development fund' of the city and they also receive some cultural subsidies from the Flemish community. As districts are not incorporated, they cannot take any loans (De Herdt & Voets: 61-70).

District	Number of inhabitants (1/1/2011)	Surface (in km <sup>2</sup> )	Number of council members	Personnel (in full time equivalents) 2009
Antwerp	182 492	87,30	33	158
Deurne	73 758	13,06	27	64
Borgerhout	44 080	3,93	25	51
Merksem	41 548	8,28	25	51,27
Berchem	41 806	5,79	23	35
Wilrijk	39 133	13,61	23	64
Hoboken	36 244	10,67	21	43
Ekeren	22 592	8,07	19	28
BeZaLi	9 791	52,66	14	15

Table 1: Antwerp districts: inhabitants, surface, council members and personnel

### The debate continues ...

In the years following the installation of the empowered districts, debate and also frustration on their functioning remained. Complaints concerned the distribution of



competences between city and districts which was not always clear and coherent, lacking financial means and personnel, long and complicated procedures, personnel that could not be directed from the districts, slow and inadequate response to advices and demands from the city and its administration. Often, the scale of the districts was also subject to criticism: particularly the districts of Antwerp (150 000 inhabitants) and Deurne (70 000 inhabitants) were said to be too large (Van Assche & Buts, 2004: 59).

The so-called political Visa-crisis in 2003, which brought to light a number of organisational problems in the city and its administration, was a reason for the district presidents to reinforce their demands for more power. The district of Ekeren even wanted to become an independent municipality again. However, as from 2003 when the new coalition headed by Patrick Janssens came into power, focus was put more strongly on a more efficient organisation of the city services and a strong re-organisation, modernisation and depoliticisation of the administration. Janssens did not believe in more decentralisation, as this could in his view harm the possibilities of the city to develop new projects. The N-VA of Bart De Wever, which won the 2012 elections, had strongly advocated more decentralisation in the campaign. However, the new coalition that came into power in 2013 clearly does not intend to change much to the current situation. The districts will receive somewhat more means, but they will no longer have the competence to draft circulation plans for local traffic. According to the government agreement, other transfers of competences will be 'studied'. Just like in the past, it seems that parties' position on decentralisation also depends on whether this could lead to diminishment or extension of their political power (Sinardet, 2010).

Party political dynamics can also more generally contribute to explain why autonomy of the districts has been even more limited in practice than in theory. While in some cases the district elections lead to substantially different election results per district, coalition formation generally remained directed from the party headquarters to create congruent coalitions with the city level. This is what happened after the three direct elections so far, in 2000, 2006 and 2012. Nevertheless, a number of incidents occurred. During the 2000-2006 legislature, the already very narrow coalition in Deurne lost its majority due to councillors leaving their political group. In 2006, it was not possible to form a coalition in Hoboken without either the extreme right or the extreme left, which had as a consequence that a minority coalition was installed, receiving support from the radical left opposition (PVDA). In 2012, the attempt to reflect as much as possible the right wing coalition of Flemish nationalists, Christian-democrats and liberals in all districts – through a deal made between these parties at city level to exclude the socialists (SP.A) – failed in a few districts, of which Borgerhout is the most prominent as it saw the installment of a left wing coalition of socialists, greens and the radical left (together with an independent councillor that was elected on the Christian-democratic list). This is the first extreme example of party incongruence between city and district – with not one party overlapping. Moreover, the coalitions are also each others ideological counterparts. The relations between the city of Antwerp and the district of Borgerhout will therefore become an important test for the Antwerp decentralisation model. The Borgerhout coalition is said to also have played a part in the decision of the new city council to not extend the competences of the districts.

## Evaluation

### The criteria

Before we set to the task of evaluating the districts, we discuss the evaluation criteria we use as well as our view on governance. Few would disagree that governance today is rather complex, and in Belgium/Flanders probably even more so. This is the case for citizens, who have to vote for the district, the city government, the province, the region, the federal government and the European Union. It is also complex for policy makers. When a local alderman wants to do something about homeless drug addicts causing trouble at a city square, (s)he has to combine forces of the local police to make arrests and patrol the streets, with the federal police to track down drug lines, with the public prosecutor (federal) to press charges, with the social welfare agencies and non-profits (largely local) to remedy drug addiction, with social economy (local, but regionally regulated) to develop job-skills, with the housing corporations and social rental agencies (largely regionally regulated) to find permanent residence, and with private developers to create a social mix in housing. If (s)he wants to renew the public domain at the square, she has to cooperate with the district. Probably some European subsidies can be obtained as well.

In response to complexity, governments search for better governance arrangements. The standard repertoire of administrative policies is institutional. Reformers seek structural solutions by creating new organisations, by setting up formal coordination committees and by pressing for increasingly more regulation. One of the holy grails of institutional reformers is homogenous competence for tiers of government. The idea is to establish once and for all what tier of government is best fit to develop particular policies. In practice, institutional reforms seldom reduce complexity. In the early 2000s, an effort in Flanders to determine core tasks for the regional, provincial and local governments largely stranded in a trench war between the three levels. At the federal-regional level, homogenous competences are equally hard to determine. After the sixth reform of the state (2011), the Flemish administration drafted a document with the steps to be taken when competences will be transferred to the regions (Diensten Algemeen Regeringsbeleid, 2011). The 547 pages in annex are recommended reading for those who believe that reforming a state is only about political courage. Policy implementation time after time proves to be thornier than envisaged at the reformers drawing table.

With the concept of *multilevel governance*, academics proposed an alternative solution to this situation of dispersed authority (L. Hooghe & Marks, 2001). Rather than being stuck in rigid institutions and institutional reform, actors need to be able to navigate through the levels of government. It is a system of continuous negotiation among nested governments in policy networks. Rather than to engage in institutional discussions on the division of competences over tiers of government, or to create new institutions and organisations, proponents of multilevel governments would suggest building capacity for networking and cooperation across governments. The idea is to cope with, rather than to combat complexity. Yet, some also warn for the great expectations that the idea of multilevel governance generates. Guy Peters and Jon Pierre argue that democratic safeguards are guaranteed by traditional institutions such as parliaments, governments, elections and not through fast changing processes of negotiation (Peters & Pierre, 2004).

Even in a multi-level world, strong fora for democratic accountability and for protection against arbitrariness are needed.

From this discussion, we take to our assessment of the Antwerp districts that we should not overestimate the potential of institutional solutions to reduce complexity and increase effectiveness of policy implementation. Yet, we also learn that strong institutions are needed as a backbone for *democratic* governance. In the following sections, we discuss whether the districts in Antwerp have contributed to more effective governance. Whether Antwerp is better able to deal with complex policy challenges. Next, we discuss whether Antwerp districts are a relevant institution for democratic governance.

### *Are districts needed for more effective governance?*

There is not much research on the effectiveness of decentralisation. We thus have to base our arguments on few studies and indirect observations. With those data limitations in mind, our general argument would be that districts did not contribute to more effective governance in Antwerp. The substantial, and widely acknowledged improvements in governance of the city of Antwerp were largely due to the professionalization and strengthening of the city government a decade ago, supported by an increased funding of the cities of the Flemish City Fund (*Stedenfonds*) as well as the federal policy for large cities (*federaal grootstedenbeleid*).

Inner-city decentralisation in Antwerp is faced with looming *coordination issues*. Districts for instance have an advisory role in the design of the public domain; local streets, playgrounds, parks, etc. Yet, the policy for the city of Antwerp is to have a uniform streetscape. The purpose is to make the streets readable for users. Most of the districts seem to follow these guidelines. Hence, all new cycling tracks in Antwerp are red, which also helps children to use them. Very sensible, but this demand for coordination allows for little room for a district to leave its mark. And indeed, few would argue that you should be able to know the district from the colours of the cycling tracks. Similarly, parks and playgrounds need to be maintained by the parks department of the city. Some uniformity across the city is probably useful in order to use equipment efficiently. Another coordination case is the plan of the mayor-to-come to work with the concept of spatial safety. It holds that the design of the public domain can discourage crime and encourage feelings of safety. If this concept will be implemented, new city guidelines will need to be imposed. A final example is the traffic circulation plans at the neighbourhood level. The districts have to draft these plans, but the plans need to fit with the traffic circulation plan of the city. The citywide plan in turn is subdivided into plans for eight zones. Those zones only very partially coincide with the district boundaries. Several districts are thus responsible for drafting neighbourhood plans within one zone. It seems that policy coordination in this case is mainly achieved by contracting out the neighbourhood planning to the same engineering firm that drafted the city plans. Again, where is the leverage for district policies? Overall, it seems that coordination issues are potentially there, but that they do not materialise because the competences of districts to make their own policies are relatively weak.

Coordination issues are further aggravated by the mismatch between district boundaries and the morphology of the city – the urban fabric. The boundaries of the

districts are based on the municipalities that existed before the 1976 merger. The growth of the city in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has effaced the open spaces between pre-merger municipalities. Open spaces that served as structural boundaries between former villages such as Deurne, Wilrijk and Hoboken. Mainly in the inter-bellum, the city has engulfed previously rural communities and integrated them into the city. The construction of new highway infrastructure in the 1960s has created new physical boundaries. The highways have carved out new cleavages across the city and have created new barriers that are difficult to negotiate. These new barriers have thus rearranged the city fabric and therefore also the ways in which people use and experience the city.

The post 1960s division of city quarters does not follow the district boundaries. In many instances, the administrative boundaries of the districts only partially coincide with socio-economic fabric of the city. A virtual Berlin wall of a 2x4 beltway (R1) separates the districts of Berchem and Borgerhout. In the local elections of 2012, some observers argued that the R1 also marks an electoral border, with a more leftist city centre and more rightist neighbourhoods in the periphery. Inhabitants of Antwerp speak of Berchem and Borgerhout *intra* and *extra muros*, since the Antwerp ringroad replaced the city fortifications built by Brialmont in the 1870s. The most striking example however is Deurne where a highway (E313), a large park (Rivierenhof) and a secondary traffic artery (N116) separate north from south. The southern part of Deurne is highly integrated with parts of Berchem and Borgerhout *extra muros*. It should be noted that not all districts are that fragmented. The districts of Ekeren and Merksem are more homogenous, as well as the polder villages of Berendrecht, Zandvliet and Lillo. Similarly but to a lesser extent, Hoboken and Wilrijk in the south are also fragmented. These more homogenous districts account for roughly 150 000 of the 500 000 inhabitants of Antwerp.

A second issue is the *division of competences*. The city is running the swimming pools and the sports halls, while the districts are doing sports promotion. The districts are amongst others providing subsidies for sport clubs, but the city is providing subsidies as well. The same goes for cultural subsidies, provided by the city and the districts. Districts, or the city for that matter, have no homogeneous competences. Those in favour of districts are arguing that precisely more homogeneity in competences would increase effectiveness of the districts. Mainly person-bound competences such as cultural, sports and youth policies come into the picture. Yet, experiences at other tiers of government learn that this homogeneity is very difficult to reach.

Coordination issues and the division of competences are mainly felt in the city administration. It should hence not come as a surprise that civil servants of the city have a significantly more negative perception of the districts than city politicians, district politicians and district civil servants (De Herdt & Voets, 2011). Only 18% of city civil servants believe that more competences for districts are a good idea. Roughly 40% of city politicians and 50% of district civil servants are for more competences. District politicians (85%) are almost all in favour of stronger districts.

A third problem with decentralisation are *spillover effects*. Citizens from other districts cannot be excluded from most of the services a district would provide nor can they be asked to pay for the services through higher taxes or retributions. The city provides a

dotation for districts proportionate to the number of inhabitants. When districts specialise - say one district has a state-of-the art cultural centre and another a top-notch sports infrastructure - than it seems plausible that citizens will take the best from every district. A concrete example: which district would have to provide (and would have to pay for) an Olympic swimming pool? This could lead to an upward pressure on the quality, but also the costs of service delivery. Moreover, if the whole city uses services of a particular district, why should it be a district competence?

The competences of the districts in Antwerp are all in all rather limited and hence, the impact on effective policymaking and implementation seems also largely absent. For many territorial competences, the need for coordination seems to be the reason why decentralisation has not taken place, while for person-bound services, potential spillovers could hamper further decentralisation. Spillover and coordination issues are not found in the support for local socio-cultural associations and neighbourhood initiatives - a task which many district politicians claim to take to heart. Studies tell us that precisely those citizens active in all kinds of socio-cultural associations seek contact with district politicians for reaching the city government (De Herdt & Voets, 2011). Statements of district politicians suggest that they are inclined to listen. This seems to be the essence of the policy role of the district: to give the district organisations a stronger voice at the city level. But can't this voice be heard otherwise?

#### *Are districts of democratic relevance?*

The main purpose of the districts has never been to improve policy implementation. The main purpose of installing an elected district level was to bring politics closer to the citizens. This in turn was expected to strengthen local democracy. Again, research evidence is not abundant, but we do have some clues on whether the districts fulfilled the promise of governance that is 'closer to the citizens' and hence more democratic.

Did district politics bring politics closer to citizens? Peter Thijssen (2007) studied the proximity of district politicians based on three electoral indicators of the 2006 election. First, he expected that if district politicians stand closer to citizens, there would be fewer blank votes in the district election compared to the city election. This was not the case. On the contrary, the district lists accumulated more blank votes compared to the city. Secondly, based on the same rationale of proximity, he expected that the number of list votes would be fewer in the districts and the number of preferential votes to be higher. Again, the opposite was true. Thirdly, Thijssen proposed that pronounced differences between the electoral results of the city and the district could theoretically be an indication of an electoral arena in the district. This appeared to be the case. Voters voted for different parties on the city and district list. This effect is however not attributed to the district dynamics. Thijssen argues that the difference mostly reflects changes in the logic of the city elections. In 2006, the city elections were 'presidential', with a strong antagonism between two candidacies for mayor: the incumbent socialist mayor Patrick Janssens and the extreme-right leader Filip Dewinter. While many voters voted strategically at the city level, the district elections were used to vote for their preferred political party. The 2006 findings are further corroborated by a study in the district of Deurne demonstrating that the names and functions of district politicians are not very well known (Peter Thijssen & Dierckx, 2011). After four years of the legislature, only the name of the president of the district of Deurne is known by more than half of the

inhabitants of the district (61,8%), the other members of the district college score between 28% and 7,7%. It should be added that Deurne was one of the more active districts in promoting its own identity. One study would provide some counterevidence. Van Assche and Dierckx (2007) concluded from a survey in three districts that citizens put more trust in their district than in city government. The survey was conducted in 2003 at the height of the so-called visa crisis that led to the dismissal of the city mayor and all the aldermen, which is rather uncommon in Belgium. We suspect that this highly mediatized crisis rather than the proximity of the districts was driving the trust levels.

Our overall conclusion is that district politics is not a political arena of significance. During the campaigns, districts are not subject of political contestation. Media, also local media, are mainly concerned with city level politics. In the latest election, the clash between incumbent mayor Patrick Janssens and the Flemish-nationalist leader Bart De Wever added national drama to the city election. Arguably, it was henceforth even more difficult for district politicians to be seen and heard. District elections are second-order elections, subordinated to the municipal level (P. Thijssen, 2007). The same can be said for the provincial and the European elections. Note that we do not argue that there is no policy relevance for provinces or the EU. We only argue that policy and political relevance sometimes diverge, and that the main political battles are not fought over provinces or the EU.

Why do the districts not function as a genuine political (electoral) level? We propose four explanations. First, districts may not have the right scale. We already discussed the mismatch of administrative boundaries with the socio-economic fabric of the city. Furthermore, the substantial difference in size between districts is remarkable. But maybe most importantly, citizens may not perceive the scale to be significantly different from the scale of the city. The distance between a citizen and its government is not a linear measurement of the number of inhabitants. A council of a town of 50 000 is not necessarily 10 times closer to its citizens than one of a city of 500 000. Perhaps citizens perceive both councils as distant. Possibly, there is a threshold beyond which it is no longer possible to have genuine personal contact with inhabitants. It is almost a truism in governance debates to deny the existence of optimal scales. We follow this argument, but we add that in multi-level settings, differences of scales need to be meaningful for democratic representation to work.

Secondly, the quality and commitment of the political staff of the districts is variable. In fact, the problem of political recruitment for municipal politics is also found at the district level. Recruitment is a general problem in Belgian politics. Marc Hooghe (2004) for instance points to the impact of declining membership of political youth organisations on recruitment. In a commentary in a newspaper, Filip De Rynck – a well-informed observer of local politics in Flanders - puts it more forcefully. He argues that *“local electoral debates seldom focus on who we actually elect; the local council. Local councillors are irrelevant, unless they want to become mayor or alderman. So, what to do with the local councils? Today already, parties have difficulties with the formation of qualitative election lists. Count the number of sons and daughters. Look how many candidates earn an income in or around the party. Check the number of civil servants on the lists. Parties are turning ever-smaller circles within their own in-group”* (De Rynck, 2012). Hence, parties do not only have to find 55 candidates for the city lists. They also have to find some 200 candidates for complete district lists. Arguably, the strongest

candidates will give priority to the city council, since the main power in the city lies at the city level. The president of the Green party, Wouter Van Besien, for instance decided to give up his position of president of the district in Borgerhout and to run for the city council.

Thirdly, the city of Antwerp did not leave much room for district profiling. The former mayor Patrick Janssens (2003-2012), with a career in advertising, did develop a stringent marketing policy. The policy was successful: the radiant A of the logo and the city's catchphrase "t stad is van iedereen" (the city belongs to everybody) are widely recognised. The current mayor Bart De Wever already announced that he will not alter this centralist type of communication policy. The strong city marketing however may have overruled efforts by districts to promote a district identity.

Fourth, one could even hypothesize that districts in Antwerp may in some case have a negative effect on the perceived distance between citizens and politics, as due to the overlapping of competences between city and districts, it is not always clear for citizens who is competent for what and the political decision-making procedure might rather become less than more transparent. Moreover, higher expectations about accessibility of local politicians may turn to frustration when a district councilor is contacted about a problem, but can only refer to the city level to solve it (Sinardet, 2010).

We believe that the prospects for district politics to become a democratically significant political arena and for district governments to become a democratic point of reference for citizens are meagre. We doubt whether the institutional solution of creating a new tier of government within the city, was the right answer to the alleged alienation of the citizen from politics. Similar observations have been made in the Netherlands, where the districts ("deelraden") are put into question in the cities of Amsterdam and Rotterdam as we speak. But what is the alternative?

### **Alternatives for districts**

The Antwerp districts do not appear to be able to fulfil the promise of a stronger connection of politics and citizens. In our view, the reason lies mainly in the fact that districts are an institutional and static answer to the cultural and dynamic phenomenon of political alienation. Yet, there are alternatives. Cities have the opportunity to engage in citizen participation. Rather than electing another council, citizens and local associations could become involved within neighbourhoods, but also with large projects of city development, with initiatives for specific groups, or with cultural or sports manifestations. Direct participation in policy and politics is hence a complement to representative democracy and not a substitute (Peter Thijssen, Van Dooren, Lanckswaert, & Dierickx, 2010). There is an expanding literature and policy practice on citizen participation that we could cover here by no means. We instead focus on the case of Ghent – with 247000 inhabitants sizeably smaller than Antwerp, but still a well-sized city in Belgium.

Flemish legislation allows for intra-municipal decentralisation in cities with more than 100 000 inhabitants - read Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges. Neither Ghent nor Bruges decided to install districts, while Antwerp did. Yet, the gap between politics and citizens does not seem to be wider in Ghent. On the contrary, trust levels of citizens in the city

government are significantly higher. The Flemish city monitor ([www.thuisindestad.be](http://www.thuisindestad.be)) shows that 45,5% of the citizens of Ghent and 40,5% of the citizens of Bruges say to trust the city government, compared to only 24% of the citizens of Antwerp<sup>ii</sup>. The electoral success of the incumbent city governments in Bruges and Ghent in the 2012 elections seems to reinforce this image of a trusted city government.

The new mayors of Ghent and Bruges, Daniel Termont and Renaat Landuyt, attribute this success amongst others to their presence in neighbourhoods and streets. In an interview in the news magazine Knack (31.10.2012), Termont also points to the difference in the style with the former mayor of Antwerp, which is said to have been more managerial. Yet, both politicians also cast doubts on the transferability of the so-called method Termont. The scale of Antwerp is different, which makes it more difficult for a politician to visit every street, attend a significant number of parties and receptions, and follow up on every complaint that reaches the mayor. Moreover, besides scale, personalities are different and not always up to the task of making the same personal investments successfully.

Hence, it seems that citizens need a strong city government that is recognisable and reachable. Yet, we cannot expect from all politicians to follow the method Termont. Fortunately, participation does not have to rest entirely on the shoulders of the mayor. In the last decade, Flemish cities engaged significantly in various projects for citizen participation (De Rynck e.a., 2009). Ghent in particular pioneered with area-based participation in 25 neighbourhoods of approximately 18000 inhabitants (Verheirstraeten, 2004). The neighbourhoods are defined based on Spatial Structure plan for Ghent (RSV – Ghent). The city appointed 17 neighbourhood-directors and communicators to support participation in the neighbourhoods, but also to coordinate city policies of sectorial departments within the neighbourhoods. Within the organisational structure, the office for area-based policies was situated directly under the secretary of the city. This position close to city power is important in relations with sectorial departments. In this way, the neighbourhood directors are a direct linking pin between the highest echelons of the city and the neighbourhoods. In addition to area-based participation, specific trajectories are followed when larger projects are planned. Examples are the redevelopment of the railway station and of the old harbour docks.

Antwerp similarly developed area-based neighbourhood policies. Yet, the history is different. In the 1990s, the office for urban neighbourhood consultation (*stedelijk wijkoverleg*) was active in a selection of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. In 2001, together with the districts, the office had to expand its activities to cover the whole territory. For that purpose, the city was divided into 37 neighbourhoods. The borders of the neighbourhoods respected the borders of the districts, even if the sociological structure of a neighbourhood was crossing district borders. Here too, the role of the districts and the city was never clear-cut. The office for neighbourhood consultation remained at the city level, but much of its activities were decentralised to districts. Although the office initially drafted neighbourhood action programmes for 23 neighbourhoods, it quickly had to re-orient its activities towards project-based communication because politicians did not agree with plans being proposed outside of their reach. Unlike Ghent, it seems that Antwerp never wholeheartedly believed in area-based participation in neighbourhoods. At a public lecture in 2003, the coordinator of the office for neighbourhood consultation compared his situation with the position of



the American soldiers in Iraq: *“we are attacked from all sides, by the city, by the districts and by the administration. Moreover, resistance is stronger than anticipated and we are not greeted by citizens as liberators”* (quoted in: (Van Ostaijen, 2003)).

The model of Ghent is to have strong neighbourhoods (of some 18000 inhabitants) within a strong city. Antwerp also invested with success in a strong city government, but the vision on participation and internal organisation is more diffuse. Some lessons can be drawn from the case of Ghent. First, it shows that strong and genuine participation can be an important complement to representative democracy. Citizens can be involved in politics in a different way. Secondly, if the outcomes of participation have to be translated to policies, it helps to be close to power. The area-based consultation office in Ghent is close to power. The Antwerp districts can only give an advice to power. Thirdly, urban neighbourhoods should be defined by how people use the city, based on spatial structure, and not based on administrative boundaries. Fourthly, unlike district structure, area-based participation is less institutional and more flexible. Citywide projects as well as projects that encompass different neighbourhoods can be straightforwardly added to the tasks of the participation professionals.

## **Brussels?**

Caution is needed when drawing lessons for Brussels from Antwerp, as the context is partially different. Brussels has for instance a larger scale and a more complex political landscape, due in part to language politics. However, if anything, it is probably the reinforcement and professionalization of the government at the level of the city of Antwerp what Brussels should consider. Every six years, a visitation committee of experts evaluates the policies of the 13 cities that receive money from the City Fund. In 2005, the committee concludes that Antwerp *“has absorbed the crises of het past, and has come out more strongly. In different circumstances, the organisation is getting its act together. The pace is faster than expected and slower than hoped for. Old cultures are disappearing, a new culture is emerging (De Rynck & Tops, 2005, p. 59)”*. In 2011, in a report titled *‘a convincing and convinced city government’*, the commission claims *“to be impressed”* by the performance of the city of Antwerp (Visiatiecommissie stedenfonds 2011, z.d.-a, p. 30). The city of Ghent transformed in a similar way. In 2005, the visitation committee concludes that *“the city is able to capitalise on the stable and strong leadership, of a professional and committed approach. (De Rynck & Tops, 2005, p. 59)”* In 2011, the committee reconfirms this conclusion (Visiatiecommissie stedenfonds 2011, z.d.-b). Remarkably, the reports of both the 2005 and 2011 committees hardly mention the districts, which seems to corroborate our reading of the districts as relative weak players.

If we translate this to Brussels, the proper level for a strong city government is not so much the municipality of Brussels but the Brussels regional government. It therefore seems evident that strengthening of city governance at the level of the region of Brussels should be considered. Keeping in mind that the nineteen municipalities in Brussels have far more competences than the nine districts in Antwerp they can be considered as an obstacle towards more global, integrated governance for the Brussels region, which is the minimum scale that corresponds to the sociological city. However, it must be said

that in such a scenario of increased competences, the Brussels regional government should probably be reformed as well to permit stronger city governance.

Although we do not judge that districts have been a great success in the Antwerp context, in the different Brussels context it would be a step forward to reform the current 19 Brussels municipalities in the direction of the Antwerp district model, by transferring a number of competences to the Brussels region. This would imply an important strengthening of the city government, while not entirely dismissing the local dimensions that for different reasons still seems crucial to Brussels politics at the moment.

Next to this, Brussels should also simultaneously look at the participatory approaches that connect citizens with policy and politics beyond elections. Instead of working in districts, Ghent chose to organise participation in neighbourhoods using city staff with direct access to power in the city. The aim should be to combine the best of both worlds; political decisiveness through representation and accountability at a level that is relevant for policies (i.e. the sociological city), and involvement of citizens at a level that is relevant for citizens as users of the city (i.e. the neighbourhood).

On a final note, an analysis of city governance in Brussels must also look at the broader picture and more specifically at which institutional (or other) response to give to the interaction and integration between Brussels and its hinterland. This is of course also the case for other urban regions in Belgium, such as Antwerp. However, while Antwerp is entirely situated within the Flemish region (which is competent for some important matters touching cities, such as mobility, labour market policy, education, ...), Brussels forms a region of its own and the greater metropolitan area of Brussels thus encompasses three regions (and consequently also three regional public transport companies, three employment agencies, three agencies for tourism, and so on). Therefore, when looking at Brussels, one gets the impression that it deals with a more generalised mismatch between the competences of its governance levels and the socio-demographical reality: while a number of the competences of the municipalities should probably better be exercised at the current level of the regional government, a number of the latter's competences should probably be exercised at the level of a metropolitan region that goes beyond the current 19 municipalities. This being said, it is in our view not necessary to wait for a more metropolitan approach to reinforce city governance. A strong city government as a nexus for policy making can also be a prerequisite for good cooperation within a metropolitan region.

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<sup>i</sup> Percentage of citizens stating that they trust the city government a lot or somewhat – 5 point likert scale.