Studying recentralization and democratic backsliding in eight countries. What have we learnt?

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Abstract: Illiberal-authoritarian politics and its global diffusion has become a general disturbing trend observed in numerous countries over the world. The emerging literatures on democratic backsliding and the illiberal turn suggest that democratic regression is under way. One of the direct implications of this trend is limiting space for political contestation, also for substate territorial units. Recentralisation, understood as curbing local autonomy, can be one of the strategies used by authoritarian governments to consolidate power and weaken the opposition. This places local governments, and large cities in particular, at the intersection of key contemporary political processes.

The paper presents the results of an investigation carried out in eight countries experiencing illiberal turn or deficiencies in democracy. In particular, it focuses on two issues:

Firstly, the paper explores the relation between democratic regression and recentralization. Is the first always accompanied by the other? Is there a 'recentralization playbook', i.e. a common set of centralistic practices?

Secondly, it analyses the responses of cities to national governments' authoritarian tendencies. How do they uphold democratic principles and assert their right to govern? Is there a 'contestation playbook' shared by cities from different parts of the world? What factors can influence the intensity and effectiveness of resistance?

Empirically, the paper is based on a case study analysis which encompasses long-standing democracies (US, UK, Italy), well documented cases of illiberal turn (Hungary, Turkey, Poland), as well as hybrid and authoritarian regimes (El Salvador, China). It follows a combination of diverse and deviant case selection methods, aimed at covering the greatest variety of political setups and examples of city activism. In doing so, the paper brings together lessons learned from cities of different geographies, setting up their fight under the labels of democratic values and local autonomy and enables generalizations which enhance our understanding of central-local interplay in the times of democratic backsliding.