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EDITED BY

Daniele Conversi,
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Spain

REVIEWED BY

Burim Mexhuani,
University for Business and Technology,
Albania
Tigran Mnatsakanyan,
Matena International School of Leadership
and Professional Development, Armenia

*CORRESPONDENCE

Arman Gasparyan
✉ arman.gasparyan@kuleuven.be

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From paperwork to pixels: workload and digital governance in Armenian local authorities

Arman Gasparyan*

KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

This study examines the impact of amalgamation reforms on workload and digital governance within Armenian local authorities, against a backdrop of decentralization and government consolidation. It explores how these reforms affect public servants at different governmental levels and ordinary citizens, highlighting the transition towards e-governance as a mitigatory strategy. The research employed a mixed-method approach, incorporating document analysis, semi-structured interviews with government officials across various levels, and focus group discussions with citizens from amalgamated communities. This comprehensive methodology aimed to assess the shifts in workload distribution and the effectiveness of digital governance tools post-amalgamation. Findings indicate a significant shift in work responsibilities towards local administrators, particularly after community amalgamations, leading to increased workloads. While digital governance tools were introduced to alleviate these pressures, their effectiveness varied. Smaller communities reported satisfaction with service delivery improvements, attributing this to enhanced government support and capacity. However, larger communities faced challenges, including dissatisfaction with service delivery, loss of local identity, and perceived inequities in tax contributions versus benefits received. The study reveals that while amalgamation and digital governance initiatives aim to enhance administrative efficiency and public service delivery, they also present complex challenges. These include managing increased workloads and ensuring equitable service provision across communities. The research contributes to the discourse on local governance reform, emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that considers the implications for democracy, accountability, and citizen engagement in the face of significant structural changes.

KEYWORDS

E-governance, amalgamation, local government, Armenia, local government reform

Introduction

With the end of WWII, the western political thought started paying more attention to the issue of sub-national governance (Martins, 1995). This problem, however, is nothing new, since even Plato and Aristotle discussed it. Aristotle's "Politics" expresses the idea that a viable polis should be self-sufficient, autonomous and large enough to provide for all the goods and service required by its citizens. At the same time, it argues that the 'polis' should be small enough to ensure the responsibility of its citizens. In Aristotle's eyes, responsible citizens are those who are actively involved in the process of managing communal social life (Aristotle, 1999). These ideas found their implication in the political thought of the 1970s. This was largely initiated by Dahl and Tufte (1973), who further developed Aristotle's views in their seminal "Size and Democracy" book. According to them, no single size of the political unit can be optimal, since

it is impossible to solve its two prime goals: system capacity (effectiveness) and citizen effectiveness (democracy). The apparent paradox that lies in front of local governments – smaller communities increase citizens' effectiveness in terms of controlling political decisions but are likely to lack the capacity to address major community issues (e.g., public service delivery) – constitutes Dahl-and-Tufte dilemma. Dahl and Tufte also argue that smaller political units are less complex and easier to access, which suggests that citizens are more capable of joining local political life and political/administrative institutions. This, in turn, contributes to the formation of “brotherhood” and community spirit.

Over 50 years later since its inception, this theory has received both support and notable criticism. Among the latter group, Mouritzen, based on his analysis of Danish local government system, concluded that citizens in small communities have a better attitude toward public engagement and local democracy and that smaller communities are more homogeneous and, consequently, more efficient in public service delivery (Mouritzen, 1989). Conversely, Newton, in his analysis of the dilemma based on data from communities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, claimed that larger communities are more effective in public services delivery and, at the same time, not less democratic, and, in certain cases, even more democratic (Newton, 1982). More recently, Denters et al. (2014), assessing the effect of population size on local democracy, also concluded that “small may not be beautiful, but it has its attractions” (p. 315), while no consistent positive effects were found to support the argument that large communities are more democratic. While these studies might hint at Dahl-and-Tufte's dilemma partially losing its applicability, most of their outcomes are inconclusive. According to Keating, no significant progress has been made since Dahl and Tufte's study, largely due to a lack of data and difficulty in data processing and analysis (Keating, 1995).

But how does this look in practice – may it evolve over time? If so, how does gradually increasing community size affect this dynamic? Does it entail that communities can have efficiency gains while retaining their democracy – or perhaps vice versa? Below, we examine these questions through the prism of decade-long amalgamation reforms in Armenia, a country that has cut down the number of municipalities by more than 90%.

Amalgamation and institutional reforms

Before jumping into our discourse on amalgamation, it is crucial to note that amalgamation reforms are not the only type of institutional reform on a local, neither are they the most dominant type of such reforms. Generally, there are two different tracks of institutional reforms: vertical and horizontal (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2011). Vertical institutional reforms refer to a devolution of functions and responsibilities from central government to regional and local government bodies (Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2011, p. 486). These types of reforms could be further broken down into ‘political’ and ‘administrative’ decentralization. Here, the former refers to the provision of political autonomy to lower levels, whereas the latter denotes the transfer of administrative functions.

Meanwhile, horizontal (territorial-organizational) reforms also exist in two variants. One of these (‘North European’) refers to territorial-organizational consolidation (amalgamation and merger of existing communities and/or counties), while the other one (‘South European’)

has not changed the small size of municipalities, but inter-municipal bodies have been created, aimed to operationally support the municipalities (Norton, 1994, p. 40). Contemporary drivers of amalgamation can be classified into political, economic, administrative, and socio-cultural factors. Political motivations include enhancing state power and stability, reducing ethnic or regional tensions, and achieving greater administrative efficiency. Economic drivers often revolve around optimising resource allocation and creating larger markets. Administrative factors include improving service delivery and reducing duplication of governance functions. Socio-cultural drivers encompass fostering national identity and cohesion.

Numerous scholars (Swianiewicz, 2010, p. 3; Allers and Geertsema, 2014; Hansen et al., 2014) have highlighted the potential theoretical benefits of amalgamation. In short, these could be grouped into the following categories: (1) enhanced governance efficiency, strengthened governance capacity and better service delivery, (2) economies of scale, (3) improved regional development, and (4) better representation and decision-making. Among the most notable challenges of amalgamation, one could point out the following: (1) Resistance to change and fear of losing local identity, (2) political complexity, (3) service disruptions and/or exploitation of the common pool, (4) economic disparities, and (5) loss of local accountability.

Empirically, a number of systematic literature reviews have tried to assess the impact of said reforms since the mid-1950s when the first major reforms emerged. Among these, Zheng et al. (2023) looked into two particular effects of amalgamation – economic, managerial, and democratic – demonstrating that amalgamation has an impact on administrative expenditure but is unlikely to reduce local government expenditure in general. From a democratic aspect, multiple adverse effects of amalgamation are noted, illustrated in political and physical distance between politicians and their constituencies, as well as in the difficulty of satisfying the preferences of increasingly more heterogeneous groups. They also noted that amalgamations usually have no significant effects on administrative efficiency and public service delivery. Another notable study, by Galizzi et al. (2023), looked into five areas of impact: economic, democratic, on services provided, on administrative staff, and socioeconomic impacts on the population. They noted that efficiency and cost savings are much less pronounced than reforms promise, while the assessment of service delivery is polar among citizens (decreases with amalgamations) and local employees and politicians (increases with amalgamations). The analysis also demonstrated a negative impact of amalgamation on local democracy as well as on the sense of local identity and trust toward elected officials among citizens.

Finally, a number of studies have concentrated on institutional/organizational aspects of amalgamation. Among these, a large number is devoted to comparing voluntary amalgamations to forced/coercive ones. Contrary to the popular belief that voluntary amalgamations deliver better results, Blesse and Baskaran (2016) demonstrated that spending cuts are mostly attributed to forced amalgamations. Additionally, Saarimaa and Tukiainen (2015) showcased that free-riding or exploitation of common pool resources, which is normally attributable to forced amalgamations (Hansen, 2019), is also expected in voluntary ones.

Case study: local governments in Armenia

The local government system in Armenia has undergone substantial revisions since the country's independence from the Soviet Union in

1991. Due to several obstacles, the first wave of reforms came only four years after the declaration, when the Constitution was adopted in July 1995. The Constitution anticipated the introduction of a reformed local self-government system with a completely new administrative division. Instead of a single-level system comprised of 36 communities known as ‘okrugs,’ the law “On Administrative Division” also enacted in 1995 divided the country into eleven administrative divisions of which ten were supposed to be provisions, known as ‘marzer,’ whereas the capital city of Yerevan was for the time being also granted the status of a ‘marz.’ These provisions were then also streamlined in the law “On Local Self-Government,” adopted in 1996. However, the status of local communities was still unclear up until 2002, when the new law “On Local Self-Government” was adopted, following Armenia’s ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Council of Europe, 1985; Czachor, 2022). At that stage, every single locality within the country was granted the status of a community, without any regard for territory, population number, or other features. Between 2002 and 2013, the number of communities in the country marginally decreased, but with no major implications.

Nonetheless, up until the first round (2016–2017) of state-wide amalgamation reforms (see Table 1 below) Armenia had 915 communities of which 442 (440 villages and 2 towns) or 48% had a population of fewer than 1,000. Among 866 rural communities, 197 (22.7%) had less than 300 inhabitants. This system also ruled that Gyumri, with a population of around 200,000, and Kashuni with 27 inhabitants had equal powers and responsibilities.

The administrative division had an impact on financial resources of the communities as well. Since 2010, for instance, the total income of Yerevan constituted 56.6% of total budgetary income of all the communities. For communities other than Yerevan, financial equalization subsidies constitute around 40% of budgetary income (White Paper on Community Consolidation and Inter-municipal Cooperation, 2011). In terms of expenditure, 76.6% of the income went to administrative costs, among which 36.4% goes to the field of education, 10.1% to economic activities, while public services of general nature (which mainly denotes salaries of administrative personnel) constituted around 25%. In smaller communities, the share of public services of general nature was exponentially higher (up to 85%). Against these figures, the Government initiated and implemented the amalgamation reforms, which started in 2015, and it was initially planned that by the end of the process, it is anticipated that the number of communities would reach around 235 (*Ibid*). However, as the table demonstrates, a much more ambitious approach was pursued during the second round of Amalgamation reform (2020–2022), whereby due to additional mergers of new communities and communities that had already been amalgamated during the first

round the number of communities reached 71, a decrease of around 92% from the initial number of 915. It needs to be stated that amalgamation reform in Armenia, at least on paper, was also associated with decentralization reforms, as illustrated in notable revisions of the law “On Local Self-Government” that took place in 2016, which will be discussed below. Nonetheless, these were largely *ad hoc* corrections, as the white paper on “Decentralization of Powers in the Republic of Armenia” was only published in 2022.

The transition from 915 communities to 71 communities in Armenia’s local government system reflects a radical amalgamation effort that aligns with global debates on the optimal size and structure of sub-national governance. In this context, we will delve into the complex dynamics of amalgamation reforms, the impacts on democracy, efficiency, and citizen engagement in Armenia, aiming to understand how changes in community size and structure affect the fundamental principles of governance and democracy.

Amalgamation reforms and the evolving landscape of local government in Armenia offer a unique opportunity to examine the ongoing debate about the size of political units and the tension between efficiency and democratic representation. This case study provides a valuable lens through which we can explore the practical implications of large-scale institutional reforms on the ground. In this paper, we will analyse the impacts of amalgamation on local democracy, service delivery efficiency, and citizen engagement, with a focus on examining whether Armenia’s experience reflects the theoretical expectations related to community size and governance. Through this in-depth analysis, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between sub-national governance structures and democratic outcomes.

By examining the Armenian experience, we can explore the broader question of whether amalgamation, as a means of changing the size and structure of local governments, can enhance democratic accountability and efficiency, or whether it presents challenges and trade-offs. This analysis contributes to the ongoing global discourse on the optimal design of sub-national governance, particularly in the context of decentralization, amalgamation, and local self-government.

In the following sections, we will delve into the specific aspects of amalgamation in Armenia, analyse the implications for local democracy, efficiency in service delivery, and citizen engagement, and discuss the broader lessons and implications for sub-national governance worldwide. This examination will provide insights into the complex interplay between the size and structure of local governments, democratic governance, and the ability to provide effective public services.

Through this comprehensive analysis, we aim to shed light on the nuanced relationship between the size of political units and the ability to balance the goals of democratic representation and administrative efficiency in the context of local government reform. The Armenian

TABLE 1 The number of municipalities in Armenia (Source: Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia).

Year	Number (as of December 31)	Year	Number (as of December 31)
1996	919	2009–2015	915
1997	919	2016	793
1998–2002	929	2017–2019	502
2003	930	2020	484
2004–2005	929	2021	79
2006–2008	926	2022	71

experience serves as a compelling case study, highlighting the complexities and challenges of amalgamation while offering insights into the dynamics of governance, democracy, and public service provision at the local level.

Methodology

Hypotheses

Aligned with the argumentation proposed by Zheng et al. (2023) as well as Galizzi et al. (2023) and drawing upon the logical framework established in our earlier scholarly publication (Gasparyan, 2023), this study centres on two key hypotheses that are related to increased workload and e-governance tools:

H1: Politicians and public servants at all administrative levels experience an increased workload after amalgamation.

H2: A substantial portion of local public servants' satisfaction can be attributed to external factors, such as the introduction of e-governance tools.

The following methodology outlines the research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques used to investigate these hypotheses.

Research design

A mixed-method research design was adopted to comprehensively analyse the impact of government strategies on increased workload and the role of e-governance tools. This design integrates both quantitative and qualitative data, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomena.

The study focused on the following four distinct approaches:

1. Firstly, we performed a thorough examination of relevant government strategies, policies, and legislation through document analysis. Primary sources included official documents, white papers, and legislative texts. Secondary sources such as academic papers, books, and reputable online resources were also consulted to complement the analysis.
2. Next, to gain firsthand insights and perspectives, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with key officials from different levels of government. These officials included local administrators (14 amalgamated communities), regional policymakers (2 *marzer*),¹ and central government representatives (5), who were selected based on their roles in policy formulation and implementation. The interviews aimed to uncover their perspectives, experiences, challenges, and successes in implementing the government strategies and legislation.

¹ This was initially not expected. However, we decided to interview heads of Departments of Education, Culture and Sports as well as of Urban Planning, Land Development and Infrastructure Management from Syunik and Ararat *marzer* considering that no community was selected from the former and only one was selected from the latter.

3. Finally, focus group discussions (FGD) were organized to engage with opinion leaders and ordinary citizens from the 14 amalgamated communities. Participants were purposefully selected to represent diverse demographics, socio-economic backgrounds, and geographic locations. These discussions facilitated an exploration of the community's experiences, concerns, and perceptions regarding the impact of government strategies and legislation on their daily lives.

Data collection

The data collection process was carried out in several phases:

1. Identification of Government Strategies and Legislation: A comprehensive search of government websites, official databases, and public repositories was performed to identify pertinent strategies and legislation related to the research topic (see the full list of documents in the next section).
2. Selection of Interview Participants: Participants for the interviews were purposively selected to ensure diversity in roles, experiences, and perspectives within the government hierarchy. Careful consideration was given to include individuals with direct involvement in policy formulation and implementation.
3. Conducting Interviews: The interviews were conducted in person or via video conferencing, depending on the availability and preferences of the participants. Each interview session was recorded (with consent) to ensure accurate data transcription and analysis. An exception was made for one local government representative, who asked to receive the questionnaire and reply in written form.
4. FGDs were conducted in community centres within the 14 amalgamated communities. A total of 17 were conducted including 2 FGDs in each community with more than 10,000 residents. The sessions were audio-recorded, and detailed notes were taken to capture the essence of the discussions.

By following this methodology, we aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the impact of government strategies on increased workload and the role of e-governance tools, as proposed by hypotheses H1 and H2.

Results

Increased workload

The analysis of the managerial capacities of Armenian Local Self-Government bodies reveals notable shifts in responsibilities over the years. The law "On Local Self-Government" allocated specific responsibilities to municipality mayors. Between 2016 and 2022, significant changes occurred, particularly in 2021, aimed at streamlining governance processes and enhancing citizen participation.

During this period, there was a substantial increase in the number of direct responsibilities assigned to mayors, reflecting a deliberate effort to empower local governance. Conversely, the delegated authorities from higher levels remained relatively stable. This suggests

a progression toward decentralization and strengthened local governance.

The data further indicates that the changes in responsibilities were reflected in citizen satisfaction with service delivery. Notably, a significant gap in satisfaction emerged between amalgamated and non-amalgamated communities. Amalgamated communities experienced both an increase in their workload and a decrease in satisfaction with service delivery, particularly in communities that were formerly large.

Interviews and focus group discussions revealed that smaller communities, especially those amalgamated twice (i.e., during both rounds of amalgamation), were generally satisfied with service delivery, attributing this to increased capacity and energetic government support. In contrast, larger communities expressed dissatisfaction, primarily due to the loss of local identity and the unequal contribution of taxes without sufficient benefits.

This division in satisfaction levels based on the size and history of communities presents a significant challenge not extensively explored in previous studies, diverging from the arguments presented by Zheng, Sun, De Witte, Galizzi, Rota, and Sicilia.

E-governance tools

Our analysis also considers the introduction of e-governance tools, focusing on municipal management information systems (MMIS) and citizen service offices (CSOs). These digital tools were implemented to improve administrative efficiency, service delivery, and citizen engagement.

While the MMIS and CSOs were intended to facilitate citizen-government interactions, interviews revealed efficiency-related issues. Notably, many residents and municipal staff were unaware of the features and advantages of MMIS, leading to the continued necessity of visiting municipalities for even trivial requests.

Regarding the issue of workload, local administrators pointed out that prior to amalgamation, the number of municipal staff members was considerably higher. After amalgamation, they faced increased responsibilities and capacity gaps in their departments. Meanwhile, the workload for the Ministry of Territorial Administration and Infrastructure (MTAI) increased significantly due to the merger of municipal staff and the need to provide methodological support during the transition.

At the regional level, the workload for MTAI respondents decreased as a result of amalgamation, allowing them to work more systematically. The reduction in the number of mayors and department heads simplified the coordination of regional departments.

These findings suggest that while e-governance tools have been introduced to streamline processes, there remain challenges in awareness and the redistribution of workloads among local administrators and regional authorities.

Discussion

The analysis conducted between 2016 and 2022 reveals significant changes in Armenian local authorities, with a focus on municipality mayors and *avagani* (council of elders). The revisions aimed to streamline governance, enhance citizen participation, and align with constitutional and legal reforms (White Paper on Community Consolidation and Inter-municipal Cooperation, 2011). The increase in own liabilities given to mayors indicates a concerted effort to strengthen local governance and empower decision-makers at the

community level, signaling a progression toward decentralization, despite the absence of a clear approach to decentralization and a lack of approved strategy presently.

Satisfaction with service delivery among citizens showed interesting patterns, with the gap between amalgamated and non-amalgamated communities widening over time. Smaller amalgamated communities generally expressed higher satisfaction, attributed to the capacity gained by the MTAI and access to government-subsidized infrastructure projects. However, larger communities faced challenges, including increased workloads, loss of local identity, and uneven resource distribution.

The relationship between the increased workload of public servants and the introduction of e-governance tools reveals interrelated challenges and opportunities in local governance. It is important to understand how these two factors intersect to shape the local democracy landscape in Armenia.

Conclusion

The findings of the analysis mostly align with Hypothesis H1, revealing that politicians and public servants experienced an increased workload after amalgamation. With the reduction in municipal staff and the merging of positions, local administrators and staff within the titular community had to assume significantly more responsibilities. This trend, however, was not faced at the regional level, where decreasing numbers of mayors and department heads helped streamline cooperation efforts with local authorities. The transitional phase, along with the necessity for methodological support from the MTAI, added to the increased workload experienced by politicians and public servants at two of the three administrative levels (local, central and regional which reports to the central level).

The analysis partially supports Hypothesis H2, indicating that a substantial portion of local public servants' satisfaction can be attributed to external factors, particularly the introduction of e-governance tools like MMIS. These digital tools significantly improved administrative efficiency and communication with citizens, leading to positive feedback from some local managers and representatives from the MTAI. However, efficiency-related issues, misinformation about MMIS capabilities, and challenges in managing social media channels also underscored the need for further improvement in e-governance implementation to fully maximize its positive impact on local public servants' satisfaction.

These two hypotheses, H1 and H2, are intrinsically linked in the local governance context. The increased workload on politicians and public servants, particularly in larger communities, necessitates efficient tools like e-governance systems to manage responsibilities effectively. Conversely, the successful implementation of e-governance tools can alleviate some of the workload challenges and improve overall satisfaction. However, it's essential to address issues related to misinformation and capacity challenges to fully unlock the potential of e-governance.

In conclusion, the analysis provides insights into Armenia's efforts toward strengthening local governance and decentralization. By addressing challenges and building on successes, Armenia can continue its journey toward more participatory, efficient, and citizen-oriented local governance. Emphasising local democracy and prioritising citizen engagement will be pivotal in creating empowered

and resilient communities for a prosperous future. The interplay between increased workload and the introduction of e-governance tools underscores the need for a holistic approach to local governance that balances efficiency and citizen satisfaction.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

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