

1. FUSION AND CONFUSION

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Switzerland is currently involved in a dynamic process of territorial change at a local level. This movement is anticyclical to the situation in most of the Western European countries, which carried out a policy of territorial reforms during the 1970's. For several years, different Cantons have been fine-tuning a policy for the fusion of communes, first Fribourg, and then Thurgau, Ticino, Valais, Lucerne and other Cantons.

Glaris made the strongest step, since the Landsgemeinde of 2006 decided to reduce the present 27 communes down to 3 in 2010. In other Cantons (NE, VD), important projects have failed, due to the refusal of one or two communes out of a greater number involved in the project. In most Cantons, the Constitution stipulates a univocal acceptation.

Près de la moitié des communes donnent comme raison principale la nécessité de changer, et près du tiers justifient les réformes par une situation financière difficile ou le sentiment d'être arrivées à la limite des prestations possibles.

1_LT 14.01.2000

The question of local territorial reforms is an interesting subject for newspapers. The following are four hypotheses for the predilection of journalists for the topic:

- The subject is easily understandable for a large public, since everybody is concerned.
- The topic has a weak correlation to positions of the political parties. Supporters and opponents of a fusion can be found in all parties.
- Journalists enjoy the subject, since a large audience is guaranteed and the theme can be convincingly argued either way. In addition, the subject requires little effort to investigate.
- On the other hand, the adoption of a particular position for the editor of a newspaper is not apparent, since potential cleavages among the readers of the paper are obscure.

In the current situation in Switzerland, we can observe quite a high acceptance of fusions for economic and efficiency-related reasons. Also, the atmosphere appears to be presently favourable to the fusion of communes.

To nuance this hypothesis, one can note that newspapers are treating the subject very positively when the fusion occurs outside the region, but are more hesitant to support projects proposed in their own Canton. Since the NZZ and Le Temps are liberal and supra-regional newspapers, this local-regional effect should not be preponderant.

The collected articles in the NZZ concerns projects in 8 Cantons. We can find a few texts with political and conceptual considerations. Certain articles propose interviews with politicians during the preparatory period, other articles analyse the results of a vote, while some texts focus on the process of realisation after acceptance.

Faktisch entscheiden kleine Gemeinden nur noch in wenigen Bereichen autonom [...].

3_NZZ 13.01.2007

In general, articles in the NZZ are very positive in their treatment of the subject and all titles indicate a clear journalistic engagement in favour of fusions. Surprisingly, this was as much the case for the conservative Glaris region as for urban fusions (Rapperswil-Jona SG, Lucerne-Littau LU, Aargau) and reforms in rural and Alpine regions (Berne, Lucerne, Anniviers VS). The only three articles more or less reluctant to get behind projects for fusions concern the Canton of Zurich, where the NZZ titles speak about “forced marriage”, saying that “it is not yet time for a fusion” or “no advantages of a fusion” are present. Even the NZZ clearly does not view local projects in the same light as proposed projects in other Swiss Cantons.

Auf der Strasse hörte ich zwar sehr viel die Meinung: Macht doch gleich einen richtigen Schritt!

4_NZZ 09.05.2006

We may conclude that the subject has a strong echo in newspapers. In general, the NZZ gives the topic a positive reception and contributes to the promotion of this policy for reasons of efficiency. In the case of projects in the Canton where the newspaper originates from, the position tends to vary, probably to cater to the sensibility of a part of the audience.

In this way, the NZZ is supportive of fusions in general, and its contribution means that fusion in the newspaper’s own Canton would at least be successful in a second round of voting.

In Le Temps, the situation is somewhat similar to that of the NZZ. The fusion of communes is seen in the commentaries as a positive element of institutional change, being an effective and modern way of answering contemporary challenges. The reforms are “obvious” and accepted without reservation.

Apparently, the failures of fusion projects are perceived as isolated incidents, even though the scale of the failures, even if only partially, could put this belief in question (Mézières, Cully and Val-de-Travers, with each project involving a large number of communes).

Four categories of articles were written ; those that show the results of fusions, positive or negative (in the Jura with Saignelégier, in the Valais with the failure of Binntal), comments, editorials and chronicles, all positively in favour of fusions, those explaining the processes implemented in the fusion, and finally interviews with specialists on the subject. Although some counter-arguments are present, most of these categories are oriented towards positive aspects of the fusions.

The articles concern 5 of the 6 French speaking Cantons (Geneva is not included in the debate), along with the Swiss-German Canton of Glaris, turning the fusion of communes essentially into a regional question. The Canton of Fribourg is given as a model of success, with the other examples (Neuchâtel, Jura, Valais) being presented in comparison to Fribourg. Fribourg has thus become the standard by which the success of fusions is now measured.

The semantic fields employed when discussing fusion are related to imposition, equalisation, debt and public management. Only the PALM project (Lausanne Morges Agglomeration Project) widens the debate by presenting action plans which provide the fusion spatial implications. Beyond this project, land planning is not a topic included usually in the fusion of communes. Issues of land availability, but above all cultural issues on the meaning of possessing and retaining its own territory may restrain the enthusiasm of the communes for fusion.