

# Decentralization and (De)Politization in Portugal

## Descentralização e (Des)Politização em Portugal

Ruben Abrantes  
Nova University of Lisbon

**Abstract**—The decentralization is one of the most common features in the contemporary political world. It seems that the idea of centralizing the power in the state apparatus is out of fashion and the new idea is to transfer some competences of the state for the local power. In a globalized world where the state is losing its ground in the political arena, international organizations in the last decades are pushing towards a New Public Management where the state has delegated great part of his competences. Tactics like that are being analyzed by many scholars who give different responses to the matter. This paper develops an analysis of what is happening in Portugal since 2015 in terms of decentralization, adopting a government strategy position and Foucault's theory of governmentality.

**Keywords**—Decentralization, Portugal, Reform, Relations of Power.

**Resumo**—A descentralização é uma das características mais comuns no mundo político contemporâneo. É aparente que a ideia de centralizar o poder no aparato estatal encontra-se fora de moda e a nova ideia é a transferência de algumas competências do Estado para o poder local. Num mundo globalizado em que o Estado perde terreno na arena política, as organizações internacionais nas últimas décadas estão a avançar em direção a uma nova gestão pública, na qual o Estado delegou grande parte de suas competências. Táticas como esta estão em análise por vários investigadores que dão respostas diferentes ao assunto. Este artigo desenvolve uma análise do que está a ocorrer em Portugal desde 2015 em termos de descentralização, adotando uma posição estratégica do governo e a teoria da governamentalidade de Foucault.

**Palavras-Chave**—Descentralização, Portugal, Reforma, Relações de Poder.

**Submitted**—12-02-2019. **Accepted**—03-06-2019.



### 1 Introduction

MANY were the philosophers through the Modern Age who defended a centralized state apparatus. This can be seen in the work of Thomas Hobbes with his classical “Leviathan”, Jean Bodin’s “The Six books of the Republic” or even Jean Jacques Rousseau’s “Social Contract”. On the other hand, there were those who stood for

a less hegemonic state power, whether in powers divided institutionally as Montesquieu wrote in “The Spirit of Laws”, or in the figure of the people, the true sovereigns, as in the work of John Locke’s “Second Treatise of Government”.

During the historical process of state formation, the centralism of competences in the state accompanied and shaped it. The social community started as being the family and, in the course of time, because of their great number, they evolved its organization into a local community vested with hierarchies and power. Later on, as a consequence of feudalism and war, the state power arises and the Leviathan awakens. The political

- 
- *Ruben Duarte Abrantes, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Nova University of Lisbon.  
E-mail: rubenabrantes97@gmail.com*

entities increased their power and progressively, in a matter of time and circumstances, concentrate the powers that were scattered in the society: military, economic, cultural, political and social power. In the same sense of proliferation of political entities - States and Nations - the international institutions began to emerge in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The state ceases to be the only actor in international relations and begins to share his place with institutions and organizations from multiple fields. Progressively the state loses its hegemonic power status in the internal context and globalization penetrates its borders. From then on, the holders of international power in a global era begin to define the traits that the world will follow: economic interdependence, supranational institutions that control the national entities, and territorial decentralization at the local level that enables the governance of populations. New types of governance arise. In the aftermath of the 1960s, states began a process of political decentralization, that is, they entrusted their local governments with some responsibilities that had previously been concentrated in central power. These new powers come as a measure of greater efficiency of the state, in a more rational way, throughout the national territory, however, aside from this normative interpretation of a "good" thing, decentralization has also been discussed in the academic field as a tactic of depoliticization (Christensen and Laegrid 2006; Buller et al. 2019) in a contemporary society dominated by governmentality (Foucault 1979).

Portugal is one of the most centralized countries in Europe. Nevertheless, the portuguese government has, in recent years, carried out decentralization of competences to local authorities, gradually delegating responsibilities that were previously responsibility of the state, through a rule-based depoliticization (Christensen and Laegrid 2006).

Especially since 1974, as the first wave of decentralization, and more recently since 2015 with the minister Miguel Poiars Maduro (XIX Constitutional Government), and later with minister Pedro Siza Vieira (XXI Constitutional Government), the country has followed the lines of political-territorial management that are recommended by the major international institutions

(World Bank and United Nations). However, it is only from 2018, with the law n°50/2018, that in the national territory begins to transfer competences, trying to reach the international parameters of other european countries. What happened then was the transition of many of these competences into the jurisdiction of the local power but with the fiscal power in the hands of the state, which raises many questions that are tried to be answered in this article. Questions like these: Why has the State decided to decentralize power? Does this decentralization of competences for municipalities in Portugal also entail attributes of political responsibility? Is the Government decentralizing to depoliticize on some public policy issues?

The Portugal government is doing a political-territorial transition common to all countries in the world, with some unique features. With no democratic administrative regions, and with local power concentrated in the municipalities, Portugal has progressively increased the competencies of the municipalities, however, without transferring the necessary financial and fiscal resources that remain concentrated on state power. What I argue is that Portugal is not doing a "true decentralization" because did not entail a mixture of three features: democratic, fiscal and administrative decentralization. I also argue in this paper for a double blame-shifting that affects the behavior of government with all political entities: European Union, External donors, local power and the citizens. A double blame-shifting focus on removing the image of a politically responsible central political power. A strategy made by blaming external actors and at the same time blaming the local powers that has the competences to do so.

## 2 Decentralization and (De)Politization

After six years of war (1939-45) which came to encompass, directly or indirectly, all countries in the world, the governments went through a period of reconstruction of their societies and economies. Since 1945, the states took upon themselves the responsibility of a variety of industries, nationalizing them. With these actions, the governments

performed a movement of politization, broadening their political, social and economic responsibilities (Burnham 2001). Progressively the “New World Order” transformed the international politics into a neoliberal system. What in the beginning started to be a utopian ideology, soon became the dominant ideology for globalization and state reform (Perk and Tickel 2002), penetrating in all aspects of society and politics (Buller et al. 2019). People started to care less “how things are done” and more about the “results”, in other words, giving more importance to outputs rather than in inputs, and this transformed how politics are done. The post-political moment we live in can be defined as a time were the citizens prefer the apolitical and the “experts” rather than political decisions, and, due to this, countries all over the world observed a phenomenon: loss of partisan affiliates, loss of political trust and the retreat of the political (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1995; Putnam and Pharr 2000; Buller et al. 2019), the consequence was a progressive deconstruction of the state in an action of “integration” and “decentralization” (Tommasi and Weinschelbaum, 2007; Bartling and Fischbacher 2012; World Bank 2000). In the words of Escobar-Lemmon (2006, 255) these actions were “driven by an elite realization that the political system was in danger of collapse”.

The movement of “integration” refers to the actions of international players (international institutions and transnational companies) on imposition of policies through the most varied mechanisms (especially legal) in the governments of the most economically advanced countries, hollowing out the state (Bourdieu 2002; Stoker 2007; Samoff 1990). In the other hand, the “decentralization” refers to the movement towards a devolution of power and responsibilities over policies to the local governments (Escobar-Lemmon 2006; Michiel 2000). Thus, states assign competencies in two ways: by assigning functions to an international regime that defines rules, trying to build “automacity” in the system and thereby formally limiting the action of governments but also, by assigning functions to a national body to whom is given a defined role in a statute, and, therefore, greater independence from the government. These are actions that

depoliticize policy-making and therefore act as a shield for governments in terms of political consequences (Bieler et al. 2006), bringing with it “a new hierarchy of spaces” (Frey 2000), a change in power relations and a “dominant tendency towards the depolitization of governance in the modern era” (Buller et al. 2019). These new forms of politics reformulate their conception and the way they are perceived by citizens. Governance is therefore different today, showing a metamorphosis of the state and a different relation between governors and governed. The citizens are a mere plaything in the hands of the politicians in the process of ensuring the stability of the society and the continuation of the neoliberal project. For this, World Bank (2000) and the United Nations have endeavored to carry forward their dominant depoliticized narratives as a “central aspect of building state capacity and market confidence” (Christensen and Laegrid 2006). A strategy of government that until today is being successful. Politicians are achieving this by turning the process of accountability a confused and unclear one, and, by telling that the “fault lies elsewhere with impersonal (invisible) structural forces beyond anyone’s control” (Buller et al. 2019; Christensen and Laegrid 2006). In this line of thought Michel Foucault is an author to consider:

*“At every moment are the tactics of government that allow us to define what is the competence of the state and what remains outside it, what is public and what is private, what is state and what is non-state. Thus (...) it is only possible to understand the survival and limits of the state taking into account the general tactics of governmentality”* (Foucault 1979, 112)

In this sense Foucault (1979) defined this as an era that surpassed the sovereign and disciplinary power, the era of Governmentality. This modern power that, according to Foucault, emerged in the eighteenth century, is an “ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target (...)” (Foucault 2009, 285). According to Foucault (1979), one

of the purposes of governmentality is to manage the population, not only in general but manage them in “depth, minutely, in detail”. The neoliberal governmentality created individualized citizens and apolitical consumers, “easily controlled and manipulated by the dominant depoliticized narratives” (Buller et al. 2019, 28). But what is depoliticization? This can be described as a government strategy in which public officials or state managers “remove the political character of decision-making” (Burnham 2001; Vries 2000). More and more countries are doing it, and nowadays “it’s widely accepted that depoliticization has become a popular mode of governance in the twenty-first century” uniting “left and right, east and west, north and south” (Buller et al. 2019, 237). Alongside with the idea of democracy, free markets and rule of law, “decentralized governments have come to be seen as a cure for a remarkable range of political and social ills” (Buller et al. 2019, 237). This (re)politicization of the local governments challenges the exclusionary monopolization of state power and presents with it an alternative way of conducting (Buller et al. 2019), a government strategy proven to be a pendular movement between decentralization and centralization (Fresler 1965) in which “trends and taking sides in discussion succeed one another continuously” (Vries 2000, 194). The contemporary thought on the matter advocate a gain of importance of cities around the globe in such a way that urban politics are being shaped by the depoliticization effects of global change (Buller et al. 2019).

Decentralization tendency was initiated in the recent decades, more precisely, in the 60’s and 70’s with the emergence of a mixed style of governance supported by a neoliberal ideology and the globalized movement of reform of the state, the New Public Management. According to Khan (2008, 509) “(. . .) the system of local government has been radically reformed both structurally and functionally and substantial resources transferred to local councils in almost all the developing and developed countries”. This characterizes a new type of hierarchical command and mechanism of power emerged as a new governance strategy (Stoker 2007). Some academics (see, for example, Burki et al. 1999, Ballesteros et al. 2013;

Rodriguez-Pose and Vassilis 2019) believe that these new powers come as a measure of greater efficiency of the state, more rational and close choices of local needs and greater democratization and citizen participation, however, aside from this normative interpretation of a “positive thing”, decentralization has also been discussed in the academic field as a tactic of depoliticization (Christensen and Laegrid 2006; Buller et al. 2019; Stoker 2007; Samoff 1990, Escobar-Lemmon 2006). Besides this, if a state pursues the maximization of power, how can it freely give up power and undo the centralist tradition? The answer seems to be a government strategy that aims to appear that it is no longer being responsible for outcomes (Buller et al. 2019) and uses other (political) actors to deflect blame (Mortensen 2013). We have to take into account that politicians are driven by ideological motives and that the state is nowadays structurally dependent of capital and so this can be “seen as a strategy to maintain political [and economic] stability” (World Bank 2000; see also Burnham 2001). So, what seemed to be a simple process of decentralization is more than that. The depoliticization of policies to the local governments do not represent a retreat from the political, in fact, it remains highly political. Depoliticization denies politics, don’t remove it, in other words, depoliticization “remakes politics rather than annihilating” (Buller et al. 2019, 134). Acting this way “politicians (. . .) benefit from the appearance of no longer being responsible for outcomes, while (. . .) maintain[ing] influence covertly behind the scenes” (Buller et al. 2019, 10). It is important not to forget that the government has not yet lost its greatest power: to have the “competence of the competences” and to determine the power it delegates to other actors (Zippelius 1997, 77) and so it has the “right to reverse such delegation and to overrule decisions its agents make” (Treisman 2007, 23).

### 3 Decentralization in Portugal

Since the formation of Portugal as an independent political entity, the monarchy was always “very keen to centralize political authority” (Magone 2010, 2; Schewinowitz 1993), however, this was only possible in the 15th and 16th century, on

the age of maritime expansion, when all the powers have been concentrated in Lisbon, the future capital of the empire. The political centralization was exacerbated with the Napoleonic wars and its influence in the administrative management of the state. Despite this centralization, the state had central government representatives running national provinces (Entre-Douro-e-Minho; Trás-os-Montes; Beira; Estremadura; Alentejo e Algarve) and municipalities. This type of territorial organization continued until the implantation of the Republic, on October 5, 1910, which gave rise to a new territorial structure divided into: districts (distritos); municipalities (concelhos) and parishes (freguesias) (Magone 2010). Nevertheless, the state continued to have the centralization of power concentrated in itself<sup>1</sup>. This reality reached its peak with the authoritarian regime: Estado Novo (Scheinowitz 1993, 353). During the Estado Novo, the political-administrative powers were concentrated in the central government. Laws and decisions were emanated directly from the national decision-making center, and municipalities became "administrative bodies completely dependent on the central government (...)" either politically or financially (Almeida 2013, 25).

From 1974, with the introduction of the democratic regime, a process of administrative decentralization and local empowerment began, which became part of the general trend of Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s. With this new regime the local power establishes itself as fundamental. This fact is proven by the presence of this power in the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic, in title VIII and composed by 19 articles (from article 235 to 354), dividing the local government with three tiers: administrative regions (Azores and Madeira), which has not been implemented yet in mainland Portugal, "municipalities (308) and parishes (4208) – all of them with directly elected bodies and with politico-administrative and financial autonomy" (Silva 2017, 10). This decentralization of power represents a diversification of the centers of national power. According to Maria Almeida (2007, 5) "the goal of the new

legislators was to create a safety net of several layers of government in order to protect the citizens from the return of another potentially authoritarian regime" and because of it "[t]he decision to decentralise and strengthen local government at the municipal level was quite easily accepted by all political forces at the time". Nevertheless, there was no radical change in the political-territorial governance, and centralism remained dominant. What dominated during the post-April 25 revolutionary process was *deconcentration*, in the Regional Planning Committees (*Comissões Regionais de Planeamento*), later Regional Coordination Committees (*Comissões de Coordenação Regionais*), being these organs directly dependent on the state. So, decentralization programs acted in the opposite direction (Scheinowitz 1993; Barreto 1984). This can be explained as Barreto (1984, 212) argues that the continuing centralization was due to, on the one hand, "the strength of traditions and the socio-economic system", and on the other hand, "the political circumstances of the revolution and the genetic characteristics of the parties and the new political system".

In the 1980s, the membership of the European Economic Community (now called European Union) was crucial for decentralization in Portugal. European Structural Funds as well as European Urban Pilot Projects and Community Initiatives were "privileged tools for diffusing this model [of decentralization] across Europe (...), representing a privileged instrument for the introduction of institutional innovations" (Oliveira and Breda-Vásquez 2012, 92) and regional development. During this decade, local governance, centered primarily on municipal power, had built government capacity and institutional and popular trust as a result of local development from European funds. Even with the successive broadening of competences and greater autonomy, the lack of technical, human and financial resources made it impossible for local authorities to act as a truly decentralized power (Oliveira and Breda-Vásquez 2012).

In the 1990s, the Portuguese government, led by Anibal Cavaco Silva, undertook "important and continuous" programs of privatization of public sectors (Ballesteros, Sánchez, and Lorenzo 2013), while other countries in the European con-

1. According to Barreto (1984, 194) Centralism in Portugal has five factors: "cultural and geographical order; historical tradition; political and social nature; economic order and cultural and ideological nature."

text continued its institutional reform of the state, progressively decentralizing it. However, after 10 years of neoliberal governance and privatization of the public sectors (1985-1995), a socialist executive led by António Guterres starts a new attempt on decentralization and initiates a referendum on the creation of administrative regions, approved by a 1991 framework law. A commission (*Comissão de Apoio à Reestruturação do Equipamento e da Administração do Território*) dedicated to this issue publishes in 1998 a paper on decentralization, regionalization and state reform in which it advocates that a European democracy requires a reform of the public administration, which makes public policies more efficient, and abandon the excessive political-territorial centralism. This reform was to be embodied in a three-level governance: central, regional and local. For the commission, this represents an “unavoidable challenge at this turn of the century” (See Comissão de Apoio à Reestruturação do Equipamento e da Administração do Território 1998). Besides what was written and said, the fact is that the political power lacked political will to carry out regional decentralization, and due to criticism exploited mainly by the political power, resulted in the rejection by referendum. The narrative that continued to predominate was a decentralization centered on the municipalities.

After the decentralization proposal was rejected Portugal ceased to do it until it reaches the 21st century as “the most centralized country in Europe” (Oliveira and Breda-Vásquez 2012; Carrapato 1979; Fernandes 2006; Direção-Geral do Ordenamento do Território 1990).

In the recent decades, “Portuguese territorial governance has been subject to considerable pressure for change” (Oliveira and Breda-Vásquez 2011), the truth is that in other southern European countries there has been “considerable changes”, but, however, in Portugal it occurred “only to a limited extent” (Oliveira and Breda-Vásquez 2011). Thus, the Portuguese territory remained “deeply centralized and put[ting] strong emphasis on formal procedures [and] the use of abstract rules (...)” (Oliveira and Breda-Vásquez 2011) and for this reason remained a system strongly hierarchical. Besides this, since the 70’s government institutions in many western countries “have

been changing their structures, systems of operation, political practice and modes of service delivery” (Stoker 2007, 1). In this sense, in an era of multi-level governance (Stoker 2007), despite the limited reforms done by Portugal, there was a greater movement towards decentralization everywhere (World Bank 2000, 107; Sorens 2009). In the European context Portugal is a country of exceptionality, as its local power is concentrated in the municipalities and has no administrative regions, which accentuates the state’s territorial exercise of its powers, revealing the strong centralism and a lack of spatial coordination. In the beginning of the new century, in 2003, the Secretary of State Miguel Relvas implemented a new idea for decentralizing governance. He created the model of Great Urban Areas (in Lisbon and Porto), Urban Communities, and Intermunicipal Communities (Silva 2017) to address the lack of intermediate levels of governance. Despite the intentions of these measures they generated a poor result and the Prime Minister José Sócrates, in response, promised a new referendum on regionalization which it did not meet as it had more urgent challenges to respond with the beginning of the Portuguese economic recession period. Overall, the government of Sócrates interrupted a process that was already starting to have some dynamism (See RTP 2011). The economic crisis begins in Portugal and Pedro Passos Coelho takes office as Prime Minister, but, unlike the previous government, it addresses the issue of local government. Passos Coelho had to implement measures negotiated with the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) and as a result the parishes saw their number decrease from 4259 to 3091 in the 2013 parish merger reform. Later, in 2015, The Deputy Minister of Regional Development, Miguel Poiães Maduro, said in a parliamentary debate that “the weight of local government in total public spending is 10 points below the European average.” (Sol 2015) justifying the law-decree 30/2015 approved by the government that establishes the system “of power delegation in municipalities and inter-municipal entities in the field of social functions” through

"inter-administrative contracts" (Sol 2015)<sup>2</sup>. During this executive (2011-2015) according to Silva and Teles (2019, 78) "On the one hand, local governments experienced a significant expansion and diversification of municipal functions, and power has been devolved to intermediate governance arrangements, through intermunicipal associations. On the other hand, local authorities' activities were kept tightly under the radar of central government. As such, the political discourse favouring the decentralization and reinforcement of local autonomy was detached from the concrete outcomes of the multiple reforms made in the local government system". So, it was not a true decentralization because it did not increase the powers of local authorities, what it did was increase the responsibilities of local governments, yet, depriving them of financial transfers from the central government. Thus, the Prime Minister of Portugal "undermined local governments' achievements of previous decades." (Silva and Teles 2019).

The 2015 elections were marked by a new political cycle that united all leftist parties in a governing solution led by the Socialist Party, but also highlighted a new stimulus for political office holders in the face of decentralization. In a new governmental offensive, a set of new responsibilities were transferred from the central state to the municipalities. In the words of the office of the secretary of state of local authorities this decentralization "consists on a transfer of competences that until now have always been exercised by the central administration and which now are exercised or ensured by the local administration". Negotiated at the Palace of Queluz, the Sintra Summit (Cimeira de Sintra) was initiated to discuss and analyze about the decentralization and the realities of the municipalities, with the main objective of collecting proposals and contributions to improve the policy and respond more closely to the intentions of the mayors and the government. According to some interviews to the portuguese press (Diário de Notícias 2018) the "intention was to reform the state", others said that this would allow "the recognition of local power as a full partner in the management of public services";

2. Back in the time the communist party accused the government of reconfigure the role of the State and to intend an action of depoliticization.

a "greater responsibility of local politicians"; or even that this would bring "a greater responsibility for the intervention of citizens and communities, strengthening democratic participation".

Later, in April 2018, the Government and the National Association of Portuguese Municipalities (*Associação Nacional de Municípios Portugueses*) have consensualised the framework law of decentralization, and at the same time the Socialist Party (*Partido Socialista*) and the Social Democrat Party (*Partido Social Democrata*) reached an agreement on the guidelines for this process. In the parliament vote, this agreement did not count with the parties that support António Costa and his government. Left Bloc (*Bloco de Esquerda*), the Portuguese Communist Party (*Partido Comunista Português*), and the Greens (*Os Verdes*) voted against this bill, and PAN (People-Animals-Nature – *Pessoas-Animais-Natureza*) did so too. Social and Democrat Center – People's Party (*Partido Popular*), the fourth force in parliament, abstained. With the votes of the two major parties (Social and Democrat Party – PSD – and Socialist Party - PS) the law 50/2018 was approved, creating the necessary conditions for a progressive decentralization and an independent commission which mission is to "carry out a thorough independent evaluation of the organization and functions of the State" and "it should also evaluate and propose a program to deconcentrate the location of public entities and services, ensuring consistency in the presence of the State in the territory." The areas of governance to be locally administrated are: education (art. 11º); social action (art. 12º); health (art. 13º); civil protection (art. 14º); culture (art. 15º); heritage (art. 16º); housing (art. 17º); port areas, touristic and economic urban development areas non-related to port activity (art. 18º); Sea, river and lake beaches (art. 19º); Cadastral information, forest management and protected areas (art. 20º); Transport and communication (art. 21º); structures for citizen service (art. 22º); proximity policing (art. 23º); animal protection and health (art. 24º); food security (art. 25º); public parking (art. 27) and games of fortune and chance (art. 28º). The process was initiated in 2019 and it will be accomplished progressively, "implying the transfer of "human, patrimonial and financial

resources" (Observador 2018). The municipalities who do not want these responsibilities have to communicate the information to the government, but, until 2021 every municipality must accept the new rules of local governance as presented in the law decree, under article 3. According to the Prime Minister António Costa, this government legislature "should be marked by the significant advance in the decentralization of competencies" for the local power, in a "major decentralization process that has taken place since 1976" (República Portuguesa 2019a). This accomplishes the Washington Consensus translating into a policy of "inspiring and imposing far-reaching programs of state restructuring and rescaling across a wide range of national and local context" (Perk and Tickell 2002, 380).

As said in an interview by the secretary of state of the local municipalities "the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party reached an agreement on the guidelines for the whole process." The objective was "to make the public administration of the State (...) less central and more local", thus, "a public administration more efficient, more agile and more scrutinized". However, "the decision to decentralize a polity (...) is inherently political, commonly involving such diverse interests as national leaders, rival national politicians, central bureaucrats, local leaders, and external donors" (Hutchcroft 2001, 42). The interest in decentralizing in Portugal seems to be a policy that interests much to the Socialist Party and the Social and Democratic Party, the "rival national politicians" that Hutchcroft approached. This rival national politicians are the parties that since 1974 usually occupy power in Portugal and seems that this process could be a means of "masking less altruistic objectives; politicians and their parties might use decentralization processes to their own benefit" (Ballesteros, Sánchez, and Lorenzo 2013).

In the interview with an autarch of Almada, belonging to the Socialist Party, it is stated that "there is here, from the point of view of the current cabinet executive, the idea that a power of proximity administrates better than a distant power" and therefore "we welcome the decentralization of competencies for local authorities (...)". The autarch says too that "has

an ideological view on these matters" and "does not see decentralization as a blame shifting". On the other hand, the Oporto's Mayor, Rui Moreira (elected as an independent) claims in some interviews that "the political parties live in the interdependence with the upper management of public administration" (ECO 2019) and also that "what the government intends to do is not a reform of the public administration" (Porto Canal 2019; RTP 2018), he believes, "but to make municipalities "regional directorates" (Câmara Municipal do Porto 2017) or even pieceworkers of functions that should be the central state responsibility (Porto Canal 2019). In the words of Baguenard:

*"[L]a décentralisation du pouvoir suppose l'existence d'une pluralité de centres autonomes de décision. Elle exige que des organes locaux aient la maîtrise juridique de leur activité, c'est-à-dire qu'ils soient libres de prendre, dans le respect des lois et règlement, la décision qu'ils veulent. Telle est la véritable décentralisation"* (Baguenard 1980, 10)

In the case of Portugal this is not what's happening. The Government is decentralizing a set of services and it is not a true (political) decentralization. This action consists in the transfer of responsibilities to local governments, politicizing them, and this transfer of responsibilities is only administrative. Political and financial control remains in the central government, allowing it to "retain control over how subnational governments provided the services" (Escobar-Lemmon 2006, 247). I identify the type of decentralization occurring in Portugal in the last years as a "fictional decentralization" as theorized by João Ferrão (Silveira 1997, 21). The fictional decentralization consists in:

*"(... ) discourses that advocate decentralization processes based on the direct transfer of functions from the central level to the lower local levels. Marked by the refusal to institutionalize intermediate levels of regulation and decision, and often by the lack of awareness of the transferred functions and the necessary resources to execute them, these discourses stimulate, in practice, the consolidation of situations centered at the*



*top and atomized at the bottom. This perspective, which defends a misleading vision of subsidiarity insofar as it invokes not to decentralize but rather to atomize, to better reign (...)*”.

I also argue that this process of decentralization in Portugal entails a process of double blame shifting, in one hand, blaming external impositions through narratives that justify action as inevitable but at the same time a long-desired government action (See Moury and Standing 2017), and, in other hand, transferring more competences (and with this accountability) to lower tiers of government not giving them resources to realize them and like this, they defect blame. So, with this, by decentralizing and retaining the power resources the governments creates the perception of not being responsible and with this avoiding and deflecting the blame. Thus, the process of accountability shifts from the central government to local constituents (World Bank 2000). Political power lies in multiple tiers of governance, and, for that reason, “political actors have incentives to deflect blame to actors at other levels” (Mortensen 2013, 164). Political power lies in multiple tiers of governance, and, for that reason, “political actors have incentives to deflect blame to actors at other levels” (Mortensen 2013, 164). This process that has less altruistic objectives does not seem to have great opposition on the part of the municipalities, being certain that the majority is controlled by the parties that negotiated the diploma of decentralization. According to the government (República Portuguesa 2019b), two-thirds (2/3) of the municipalities have already joined this reform. This allows me to conclude that in Portugal the process evidenced here follows what other countries are doing, which in the near future will change the governance relationship between governors and governed, but also the way we understand who has political responsibilities.

## 4 Conclusion

This era of neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 1979) transformed the state into a materialized Leviathan. With many powers and technics at its disposal, the government control his people by an

ideologic state apparatus and the market ideology that today shapes the “hearts and minds” of the citizens.

So many powers in the state gives it the possibility to decide the fate of the people, and so, with an ideologic support of the international institutions, governments all over the world are placing is power in an international regime (supranational) and in its lower tiers of jurisdiction (subnational), however, keeping the “competence of competencies” (Zippelius 1997, 77). These actions create a complex governance system in which lines of accountability become confused, at the same time politicians claim that decisions are no longer their responsibility (Christensen and Laegrid 2006). “As the work of Mouffe, Bogggs, Rancière and Habermas (. . .) emphasize, the adoption of a tactic or tactics that seeks to downplay or diminish the role and responsibilities of elected politicians clearly raises far reaching questions about the utility and traditional frameworks of representative democracy” (Christensen and Laegrid 2006, 70). It is clear that a new relation between govern and governed are emerging progressively.

There is academic literature that sees the transfer of competencies as a positive action, but, nevertheless remains some literature that analyses the theme as a strategy of government in blame shifting. The fact is that “issues once politized have since been variously parlayed into technocratic structures and routinized conventions, absorbed by transnational agencies and metaregulatory frameworks” (Perk 2002, 391) and more recently into the local power. In Portugal, since the end of Estado Novo the country is delivering power to supranational institutions, however, was always sceptic and reluctant doing the decentralization. The present government “should be marked by the significant advance in the decentralization of competencies”, said the prime minister (República Portuguesa 2019a), a fact that is happening more dramatically since 2015. “The decision to decentralize a polity (. . .) is inherently political, commonly involving such diverse interests as national leaders, rival national politicians, central bureaucrats, local leaders, and external donors” (Hutchcroft 2001, 42). The interest in decentralizing in Portugal seems to be a policy that interests much to the Socialist Party and the

Social and Democratic Party, the “rival national politicians” that Hutchcroft approached. This rival national politicians are the parties that since 1974 usually occupy power in Portugal and seems that this process could be a means of “masking less altruistic objectives; politicians and their parties might use decentralization processes to their own benefit” (Ballesteros, Sánchez, and Lorenzo 2013).

Until 2021 the municipalities have, mandatorily, to accept the new competences that were previously responsibility of the central state. What is happening in Portugal is not a true decentralization (Baguenard 1980) because the government maintains the political, economic and financial instruments that does not permit the local powers to act as they want or need to, and so, the government continues to have the (true) decisional power in its hands. By decentralizing and retaining the power resources the governments creates the perception of not being responsible and with this avoiding and deflecting the blame.

It seems to be a government movement of reform that is happening all over the world, and so in a middle of a dynamic of change that has not come to a conclusion. Like said by Gerry Stoker (Stoker 2007, 193): “We are in an era of governance without government”.

## References

- [1] Almeida, Maria Antónia Pires de. 2007. *Party politics in Portugal: municipalities and central government*. Centro de Investigação de estudos de sociologia, ISCTE. <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/6f2d30d4-fd1c-4fd8-b0f5-4f35706ef0ec.pdf> (last accessed May 2019)
- [2] Almeida, Maria Antónia Pires de. 2013. *O Poder Local do Estado Novo à Democracia: Presidentes de câmara e governadores civis, 1936-2012*. Lisbon: ebook.
- [3] Almeida, Pedro Tavares de, and Rui Miguel C. Branco. 2007. *Burocracia, Estado e Território: Portugal e Espanha (séculos XIX-XX)*. Lisbon : Livros Horizonte.
- [4] Baguenard, Jacques. 1980. *La Décentralisation territoriale*. Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- [5] Ballesteros, Beatriz Cuadrado, Isabel M. García Sánchez, and José M. Prado Lorenzo. 2013. "The Impact of Political Factors on Local Government Decentralisation." *International Public Management Journal* 16(1): 53–84.
- [6] Barreto, António. 1984. "Estado central e descentralização: antecedentes e evolução (1974-1984) - Classe e Estado, Sindicatos na reforma agrária." *Análise Social* XX: 121-217
- [7] Bartling, Björn, and Urs Fischbacher. 2011. "Shifting the Blame: On Delegation and Responsibility." *Review of Economic Studies* 79(1): 67–87.
- [8] Bieler, Andreas, Werner Bonefeld, Peter Burham, and Adam David Burnham. 2006. *Global Restructuring, State, Capital and Labour Contesting Neo-Gramscian Perspectives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [9] Bourdieu, Pierre. 2002. "Against the Policy of Depoliticization." *Studies in Political Economy* 69(1): 31-41.
- [10] Buller, Jim, Pinar E. Dönmez, Adam Standing, and Matthew Wood. 2019. *Comparing Strategies of (De)Politicisation in Europe: Governance, Resistance and Anti-politics*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [11] Burki, Shahid Javed., Guillermo Perry, and William R. Dillinger. 1999. *Beyond the Center: Decentralizing the State World Bank Latin American and Caribbean Studies*. Washington D.C.: World Bank.
- [12] Burnham, Peter. 2000. "Globalisation, Depoliticisation and ‘Modern’ Economic Management." In *The Politics of Change: Globalisation, Ideology and Critique*, edited by Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis. London: Palgrave.
- [13] Burnham, Peter. 2001. "New Labour and the politics of depoliticization." *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 3(2): 127–149.
- [14] Câmara Municipal do Porto. 2017. "Rui Moreira antecipa debate da descentralização e lança avisos ao Governo", last accessed March 15, 2019. <http://www.cm-porto.pt/noticias/rui-moreira-antecipa-debate-da-descentralizacao-e-lanca-avisos-ao-governo>
- [15] Carrapato, Júlio Filipe de Almeida. 1979. *Descentralização e regionalização*. Vila Real de Santo António: Litográfica do Sul.
- [16] Christensen, Tom, and Per Laegrid. 2006. *Autonomy and Regulation: Coping with Agencies in the Modern State (Comparative Studies of Organizations in the Public Sector)*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- [17] Comissão de Apoio à Reestruturação do Equipamento e da Administração do Território. 1998. *Descentralização, Regionalização e Reforma Democrática do Estado*. Lisbon: MEPAT, CAREAT.
- [18] Conyers, Diana. 1984. "Decentralization and development: a review of the literature." *Public Administration and Development* 4(2): 187-197.
- [19] Conyers, Diana. 1983. "Decentralization: the latest fashion in development administration?" *Public Administration and Development* 3(2): 97-109.
- [20] Crozier, Michel, Samuel Huntington, and Joji Watanuki. 1975. *The crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York: New York University Press.
- [21] Dalton, Russell J. 2004. *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- [22] Diário de Notícias. 2018. "Descentralização debatida em cimeira de áreas metropolitanas de Lisboa e do Porto", *Diário de Notícias*, March 19. <https://www.dn.pt/lusa/interior/descentralizacao-debatida-em-cimeira-de-areas-metropolitanas-de-lisboa-e-do-porto-9198739.html>.
- [23] Dillinger, William, and Marianne Fay. 1999. "From Centralized to Decentralized Governance." *Finance and Development* 36(4): 19.
- [24] Duarte, Bruna A. Marques. 2016. "Descentralização Administrativa: Novos Caminhos, Novas Realidades." Master's diss., University of Lisbon, Portugal.
- [25] ECO. 2019. "Rui Moreira defende «regionalização política» para descentralizar", *ECO*, January. <https://eco.sapo.pt/2019/01/29/rui-moreira-defende-regionalizacao-politica-para-descentralizar/>.

- [26] Escobar-Lemmon, Maria. 2006. "Executives, Legislatures, and Decentralization." *Policy Studies Journal* 34(2): 245-63.
- [27] Fernandes, José Alberto Rio. 2006. "Reestruturação da administração territorial portuguesa: o duplo centralismo em busca de escalas intermédias." *Xeográfica, Revista de Geografia, Território e Medio Ambiente* 6: 95-113.
- [28] Fesler, James. 1965. "Approaches to the Understanding of Decentralization." *The Journal of Politics* 27(3): 536-566.
- [29] Foucault, Michel. 1979. *Microfísica do Poder*. Rio de Janeiro: Edições Graal:277-292.
- [30] Foucault, Michel. 2009. *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1977-78*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan United Kingdom.
- [31] Frey, Klaus. 2000. "Descentralização: Lições atuais de Tocqueville." *Lua nova* 51: 77-118
- [32] Hutchcroft, Paul D. 2001. "Centralization and Decentralization in Administration and Politics: Assessing Territorial Dimensions of Authority and Power." *Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration* 14(1).
- [33] John, Peter. 2001. *Local Governance in Western Europe*. SAGE Publications.
- [34] Kettl, Donald F. 2005. *The Global Public Management Revolution*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- [35] Khan, Shadiullah. 2008. "Local Governments and Local Elites." *Local Government Studies* 34(4): 509-28.
- [36] Lefèvre, Christian. 2010. "The Improbable Metropolis: Decentralization, Local Democracy and Metropolitan Areas in the Western World." *Análise Social* 45(197): 623-637.
- [37] Machado, J. Baptista. 1982. *Participação e Descentralização: Democratização e Neutralidade na Constituição de 76*. Lisbon: Alameda.
- [38] Magone, José M. 2010. "Portugal: local democracy in a small centralized Republic." In *The Oxford handbook of local and regional democracy in Europe*. UK: Oxford Handbooks Online.
- [39] Manor, James. 1999. *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization*. World Bank.
- [40] Mortensen, Peter B. 2013. "(De-)Centralisation and Attribution of Blame and Credit." *Local Government Studies* 39(2): 163-81.
- [41] Moury, Catherine, and Adam Standring. 2017. "Going beyond the Troika: Power and discourse in Portuguese austerity politics." *European Journal of Political Research* 56(3): 660-679.
- [42] Nanetti, Raffaella Y., Helena Rato, and Miguel Rodrigues. 2004. "Institutional capacity and reluctant decentralization in Portugal: the Lisbon and Tagus Valley Region." *Regional Federal Studies* 14(3): 405-429.
- [43] Norris, Pippa. 1999. *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [44] O'Neill, Kathleen. 2003. "Decentralization as an Electoral Strategy." *Comparative Political Studies* 36(9): 1068-1091.
- [45] Observador. 2018. "Parlamento aprovou lei-quadro que descentraliza competências para os municípios", July 28. <https://observador.pt/2018/07/18/parlamento-aprovou-lei-quadro-que-descentraliza-competencias-para-os-municipios/>
- [46] Oliveira, Carlos, and Isabel Breda-Vázquez. 2012. "Europeanisation of territorial policies in Portugal and Italy: a cross-national comparison." *Policy Politics, The Policy Press* 40(1): 89-105.
- [47] Oliveira, Carlos, and Isabel Breda-Vázquez, 2011. "Territorial Governance in Portugal: Institutional Change or Institutional Resilience?" *disP - The Planning Review* 47(186): 64-76.
- [48] Perk, Jamie, and Adam Tickell. 2002. *Neoliberalizing Space*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- [49] Persson, Torsten, Gerard Roland, and Guido Tabellini. 1997. "Separation of Powers and Political Accountability." *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 112(4): 1163-1202.
- [50] Porto Canal. 2019. "Aquila que foi proposto não é descentralização", *Porto Canal*, January 25. <http://www.porto.pt/noticias/ruimoreira-no-porto-canal-aquila-que-foi-proposto-nao-e-descentralizacao>
- [51] Putnam, Robert, and Susan Pharr. 2000. "Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Countries?" *Foreign Affairs, Capsule Review*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2000-07-01/disaffecteddemocracies-whats-troubling-trilateral-countries>
- [52] República Portuguesa. 2019a. "Há uma clara correlação entre a maior centralização e o menor desenvolvimento", February 12. <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc21/comunicacao/noticia?i=ha-uma-clara-correlacao-entre-a-maior-centralizacao-e-o-menor-desenvolvimento> (last accessed March 2019.)
- [53] República Portuguesa. 2019b. "Cerca de dois terços dos municípios aderem à Descentralização", February 1. <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc21/comunicacao/noticia?i=cerca-de-dois-tercos-dos-municipios-aderem-a-descentralizacao> (last accessed March 2019.)
- [54] Rodríguez-Pose, Andrés, and Tselios Vassilis. 2019. "Well-Being, Political Decentralisation and Governance Quality in Europe." *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 20(1): 69-93.
- [55] RTP, 2018. "Rui Moreira diz que não há qualquer descentralização de competências para as autarquias", *RTP* July 13. [https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/ruimoreira-diz-que-nao-ha-qualquer-descentralizacao-de-competencias-para-as-autarquias\\_v1087385](https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/ruimoreira-diz-que-nao-ha-qualquer-descentralizacao-de-competencias-para-as-autarquias_v1087385) (last accessed March 2019.)
- [56] Ruano, José Manuel, and Marius Proffiroiu. 2017. *The Palgrave Handbook of decentralization in Europe*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [57] Samoff, Joel. 1990. "Decentralization: The Politics of Interventionism." *Development and Change* 21(3): 513-30.
- [58] Scheinowitz, Abraham S. 1993. *A Descentralização do Estado: Bélgica, França, Itália, Espanha, Portugal, Dinamarca, Brasil, Estados Unidos*. Brasília: Editora Brasília Jurídica.
- [59] Silva, Carlos Nunes. 2017. "Political and administrative decentralization in Portugal: Four decades of democratic local government." In *Local Government and Urban Governance in Europe*, edited by Carlos Nunes Silva and Ján Buček. Springer International Publishing.
- [60] Silva, Patrícia, and Filipe Teles. 2019. "The Biggest Loser? Local public services under austerity measures in Portugal." In *Local Public services in times of austerity across Mediterranean Europe*, edited by Andrea Lippi and Theodore N. Tsekos. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [61] Silveira, Luís Nuno Espinha da. 1997. *Poder Central, Poder Regional, Poder Local: uma perspectiva histórica*. Edições Cosmos.
- [62] Sorens, Jason. 2009. "The Partisan Logic of Decentralization in Europe." *Regional and Federal Studies* 19(2): 255-72.
- [63] Sorens, Jason. 2009. "The Partisan Logic of Decentralization in Europe." *Regional Federal Studies* 19(2): 255-272.
- [64] Stoker, Gerry. 2003. *Public Policy and Administration Transforming Local Governance: From Thatcherism to New Labour*. Macmillan International Higher Education.

- [65] Tommasi, Mariano, and Frederico Weinschelbaum. 2007. "Centralization vs. Decentralization: A principal-agent analysis." *Journal of Public Economic Theory* 9(2): 369-389.
- [66] Treisman, Daniel. 2007. *The Architecture of Government: Rethinking Political Decentralization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [67] Vieira, Alberto. 1998. *O Município no Mundo Português: Seminário Internacional*. Funchal: Centro de Estudos de História do Atlântico.
- [68] Vries, Michiel S. de. 2000. "The Rise and Fall of Decentralization: A Comparative Analysis of Arguments and Practices in European Countries." *European Journal of Political Research* 38(2): 193-224.
- [69] World Bank. 2000. *Entering the 21st Century: World Development Report 1999/2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [70] Zippelius, Reinhold. 1997. *Teoria Geral do Estado*. Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian.



**Ruben Duarte Abrantes** is 22 years old, holds a bachelor's degree in International Relations from the University of Lisbon and is currently pursuing a master's degree in Political Science and International Relations at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences (FCSH) of the Nova University of Lisbon (Portugal). His research focuses mainly on the themes of Marxism, the New Left and

Political Parties.