



# Cooperative competition? The ambivalence of *coopetition* in territorial authorities

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## Abstract

Cooperative competition – *coopetition* – is a phenomenon whose influence extends to the sphere of territorial public management. Based on an initial questionnaire conducted among 252 territorial authority managers, an exploratory case study on inter-municipal cooperation in France's Rhône-Alpes region, and an in-depth follow-up survey among 10 leaders, we analyse why and how cooperation between territorial authorities is advisable, despite the potential political rivalry between local elected representatives and the specific challenges of each territory, provided that they respect the principles of equity in governance and avoid conflicts of interest when managing their teams.

## Points for practitioners

Our research shows the benefits of cooperation between competing territorial authorities, provided that they respect the principles of equitable management. This implies the need to distribute power equally among partners of all sizes, to take decisions collectively by a majority, or even unanimously when it comes to a change of governance, and not to infringe on the prerogatives of each partner, unless added value can be gained from pooling the efforts of territorial authorities.

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**Introduction**

Reaching out to competitors is a complex but unsurprising phenomenon in today's world. In an attempt to describe this seemingly unnatural situation, Nalebuff and Bradenburger (1996) coined the term 'coopetition' to underline the possibility of cooperation in competition. Coopetition is a paradoxical strategy of cooperation among competitors, enabling them to collectively achieve mutual gains (Luo, 2007).

Coopetition is not limited to the private sphere but also has an influence on public management. In this article,<sup>1</sup> we will focus our attention on territorial public management in France, characterized as it is by a certain paradox: on the one hand, the Colbertist tradition pushes for a centralization of the major planning decisions with the creation of large entities such as regions, metropolises and *départements*, while, on the other hand, the principle of decentralization encourages public decisions to be taken as close as possible to the citizen in the dense network of the 35,000 communes. Hence the term 'territorial millefeuille',<sup>2</sup> which is much used in France, notably in the press but also in analytical works,<sup>3</sup> to evoke the lack of clarity in this division, in so far as each territorial authority superimposes itself on the others, without replacing them or actual merging with them. This means that the different local strata share the administration of the same territory and finance the same projects in a way that is both complementary and competitive due to the possible common competences and background political issues.

This article sets out to understand why and how territorial authorities within the same territory can cooperate, overcoming political divides and other local issues (Bengtsson and Kock, 2000). For a territorial authority, coopetition seems paradoxical on the whole, as it aims to reinforce the attractiveness of the territory with the help of its rivals, often of another political hue.

The political and the administrative, two dimensions that are deemed to be distinct and complementary in the workings of the public sector, are partially intertwined when it comes to matters of strategic management, due to the two-tier governance of territorial authorities (Lamarzelle, 2011). This observation is particularly evident when it comes to coopetition in so far as it integrates external strategic dimensions and internal managerial dimensions. That is why our research problem covers both the political and administrative aspects of the subject. To do so, it focuses here on the point of view of the territorial leader, considered as a pivot of the strategic implementation of political choices. While the elected representatives may be the only legitimate decision-makers in terms of strategic direction with other territorial authorities, they rely on their Director-General of Services and his or her teams to identify the conditions for success and the operational modalities. Consequently, it can be considered that, by assisting elected representatives with

policy choices, the territorial director is involved in the political game (Le Saout, 2009). The limit of this methodological option is that it does not directly take on board the political dimension and underlines the need for additional work in this direction. However, it is based on the principle that public leaders have strengthened their managerial and strategic skills over recent decades (Bartoli and Blatrix, 2015) and are developing their area of legitimacy by prioritizing the quality of the relationship with the head of the executive while respecting and preserving the political legitimacy of the latter (Durat, 2012). In this respect, the managerial dimension plays a major role in the definition and implementation of cooptation.

In order to deal with this issue, the first part of this article considers the advisability of the theoretical transposition of the managerial concept of cooptation to the public sector. Then, after a second part devoted to the empirical study of the phenomenon, based on three complementary field analyses, we analyse why and how the French territorial authorities manage cooptation situations, in keeping or not with the theoretical reading grids called forth.

## **Cooptation in public management**

### *Cooptation and the public sector: the challenges and specific characteristics*

A number of factors and public policies pave the way for cooptation in the public sector. As Bartoli and Blatrix (2015) point out, the policy of calling for proposals, the development of benchmarking, good practices, and other showcase projects are characterized by a mix between the rationale of emulation and that of competition. For example, tendering procedures can be particularly conducive to cooptation when the problem of critical size compels rival local authorities to join forces as part of a single bid. In other situations, on the contrary, the call for proposals procedure reinforces the competitive rationale when it comes to allocating subsidies to the most 'efficient' local authority according to public policy criteria. Finally, the harmonization of good practices through benchmarking may, on the contrary, encourage cooperation between communities needing to exchange experiences. However, all these practices are often ambivalent, calling on cooperation and competition.

In the French territorial system, made up of several tens of thousands of communes and other establishments since the decentralization laws of 1982, several levels of competition can exist. Competition can exist on an internal level within the same territorial authority, especially between the holders of technocratic/administrative power and the holders of political power, but also in the tensions between politicians of different parties. It can also rage on an external level, between territorial authorities with different political orientations or when it comes to attracting resources to the territorial authority or getting companies to set up there. As a result, local authorities are in competition by nature to obtain public subsidies and to benefit from local tax resources. However, the logic of cooperation is equally important, as territorial issues are often shared by both the actors and the

institutions and lead to the marshalling of energies around projects and actions of common or general interest. This is where the rationale of coopetition comes into its own.

### *The management of public coopetition*

Implementing a coopetition strategy is always a managerial challenge. When it comes to implementing it within a territorial authority, the difficulty of finding an effective method of regulation arises, on the one hand, from the lack of control between territorial authorities and, on the other hand, from the difficulty of requesting the arbitration of the state, given that the aim is to break free from its yoke, with the only necessary intervention being to oversee the legality of the actions.

For a territorial authority, coopetition may seem paradoxical, in particular when it aims to increase the attractiveness of territorial anchoring by pooling technical competences and financial resources, with the help of potentially rival elected representatives, anxious to keep their seats in future elections. While coopetition can offer an advantage in terms of territorial branding, it nevertheless presupposes the existence of safeguards, with managerial processes capable of preserving the autonomy of each and promoting the mutual dependence of all. In this regard, Bengtsson and Kock (1999) advocate a number of managerial principles designed to reduce conflicts of interest. For example, it is deemed preferable to ensure a separation between the rationale of action, that of cooperation and that of competition, which can be achieved according to the nature of the territorial competence. The territorial authority manages several very different areas: transport, health, education, highways, security, civil status, cleanliness, town planning, etc. This means that it can cooperate with rival territorial authorities in one area of competence, and give free rein to its territorial competition in others (to try to attract companies to locate in its territory, for example).

The other challenge is to integrate stakeholders (Freeman and Reed, 1983), namely the various public entities, citizens, elected representatives and territorial managers, investors and other players within the territory. In the case of coopetition, the primary stakeholders can be considered to be the competitors-partners and their various internal social entities (elected officials, territorial managers, employees, etc.) as well as the inhabitants or organizations established in the territory and the services of the state, to the extent that they are institutionally linked with the territorial authority in question. In addition, the media, public opinion or actors in other territories may affect or be affected by the achievement of the local authority's objectives, but in a way that is not systematically contractual, and therefore 'secondary' (Clarkson, 1995). In this approach, the role of the territorial leaders is to facilitate the management of coopetition by developing a form of democratic governance with the primary stakeholders, while also taking the interests of the secondary actors into account. These different mechanisms can help to overcome the lack of hierarchy or common control to regulate deviant behaviour through pressure to conform between the competitors-partners.

The tacit pressure of the group can also be very effective in correcting deviations from the norm. This consideration ties in with the work of Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) on the economics of worth based on conventional rules. According to this theory, cooptation is based on common worth, 'legitimate forms of the common good such as the defence of the home territory or the safeguarding of the values of public corporatism', allowing each elected representative to collaborate by agreement with the other competing elected representatives. Each political rival at the head of a territorial authority is thus able to refer to unwritten benchmarks, which will legitimize public action and limit deviant behaviour at the territorial level.

## **Cooptation in the territories: an empirical approach**

### *Methodology*

The empirical research was based on three complementary stages: first a broad preliminary survey via questionnaires, then an exploratory case study on a territory, concerning a recently formed metropolitan cluster, and finally an in-depth survey of 10 territorial leaders. The initial data were compiled within the framework of the preparation, implementation and evaluation of a symposium<sup>4</sup> on the theme of territorial cooptation. The first questionnaire-based survey on the theme of territorial cooptation was distributed among several hundred members of the Association of Territorial and Former Leaders of the INET,<sup>5</sup> generating feedback from 252 usable responses.

Thus, the case study<sup>6</sup> of the Rhône-Alpes territory was carried out on the basis of the following empirical data: preparation of the presentation, with and by the Director-General of Services (DGS), of the process of setting up a metropolitan cluster during the research symposium; study of the debates with other territorial leaders generated by this presentation and recorded during the symposium; additional information and analysis carried out via validation and updating work with the DGS re-interviewed in semi-directive form two years later and via a complementary interview with another Director-General of Services of a territorial authority concerned by this case. Although the empirical data come from a single central source, which we call the pivot interviewee of the metropolitan area studied, several factors must be highlighted that reduce the impact of this limit: first, due to the three validation steps over time, the study incorporates several interviews; second, the pivot interviewee who served as the source of the information was directly involved in the process of change himself, and also shared the various points of view of his colleagues, both in the interviews and in his public presentation at the symposium; third, the contribution of the case cannot be claimed to lie in the number of interviews, which is too small, but in the fact that the information is collected longitudinally over several years.

Thus, in order to verify the solidity of our argumentation by methodological triangulation, we launched a complementary study by surveying a dozen or so territorial directors, constituting a panel of experts,<sup>7</sup> in order to gather their

perceptions of the practices of cooperative competition. These 10 players were identified among the professionals in the field able to bring a double dimension: on the one hand, they are territorial leaders themselves, active in local authorities; they also assume cross-cutting responsibilities in connection with their job, either as elected representatives of professional associations or networks, or as occasional contributors to higher education or study programmes. They had also participated in the initial symposium and responded to the first survey. Thus, the 10 interviewees were able to attest at the same time to the practices of their entities, and to take a distanced view on the problematic studied. They are therefore considered as experts in two ways: thanks to their managerial responsibilities and thanks to their significant previous knowledge of the subject matter.

### *Summary of each stage*

*Survey of conceptions and practices of territorial cooperation and competition.* The questionnaire surveys were conducted in early 2013 through the Association of Territorial Leaders. Two-thirds of respondents were Directors-General of Services (DGS), Directors or Department Heads of local authorities, the others being either elected officials or mission heads. The objective of the survey was to analyse the relevance, acceptability and reality of the concept of cooperation in territorial authorities. The central hypothesis was the following: without being explicitly or formally labelled as such, situations that combine cooperation and competition are familiar and effective in the local sphere. The questionnaire was broken down into three parts: the challenges and evolution of the territorial organization; situations of cooperation and competition; and the management of cooperation at the local level. In the first part, the questionnaire referred to three major evolutions of the territorial context (the multiplication of stakeholders, the scarcity of public resources and the development of communication and information tools) and analysed their impact on cooperation and competition. In the second part, the challenges and the concrete examples of cooperation and competition situations were compared. In the third part, the concept of cooperation was directly tested, and the possible role of territorial managers and elected representatives in relation to these challenges addressed.

Several important points emerged from this survey. First, while cooperation is considered a necessity for 61 percent of respondents, 40 percent also consider that competition is very much present, while it is a driver of performance for one-third of territorial managers. The observed existence of the two phenomena of cooperation and competition is shared by a large majority. In project mode, the territorial authority is at the crossroads of a number of relationships with other actors, whether public, private or associative, or with other territorial authorities at the inter-municipal level, regardless of the political colour of the elected officials. This need to work in project mode, including with politically different and potentially rival territorial authorities, is justified by the scarcity of public resources, as the following excerpts of the verbatim transcripts show: ‘There is a need for

co-financing, and therefore cooperation between the city/urban community/*département* for the hosting of major sporting events'; 'We must reason by pooling means, bringing teams together, releasing energies and co-producing public services with the inhabitants'; 'The pooling of human resources and projects is mainly done through cooperation between the city and the urban community'; 'When it comes to applications for cultural subsidies from players such as the Regions, the reduction in resources puts us in competition with other applicants, but at the same time, cooperating is the means of pooling and rationalizing our resources.'

This is one of the reasons why networking within a territory and with neighbouring territories is on the rise. This allows the consultation bodies to come into play (trade unions, networks of specialists, clubs and working groups), but also the transposal of competences outside the territory, as is the case for tourism within a more global project, communication, and models of participatory democracy. In this context, local elected representatives must set aside their political differences in order to contribute collectively to the attractiveness of their territory: 'The political context is delicate in cooperation: the vision can be very different between elected representatives coming from the private sector, with a private culture and set on managing a local authority as a business, and elected representatives more focused on the idea of general interest, with a more pronounced vision of the public interest'; 'Competition can hamper the progress of a project by creating competition for resources for other projects that are not necessarily comparable, carried out by local authorities that do not have the same means ... to defend it, with the risk of increasing inequality within the territory'; 'In the fields of culture and tourism, the darlings of elected representatives, issues hinged around the identity of the territory are sometimes confused with those of the legitimacy of the elected representative or even his or her "private preserve".'

The major strategic issues that induce cooperation and competition are mainly threefold. The first is economic, involving several variables: scarcity of financial means, lack of availability of human resources, etc. The second is political, with respondents saying that they are constrained by this dimension, which sometimes pushes them into inextricable situations with destructive effects on territorial authorities. Third, societal issues arise through a profound change in practices and organizational modes. There are certain political and organizational limits to these issues, which respondents are aware of: 'Depending on the level of the project and its investments, the agreement between the authorities may be more or less consensual depending on whether one is following a strategy of regional or national competition, even international or purely local'; 'The availability of the actors is not always guaranteed, due to the lack of an adapted and simplified governance tool between the authorities that allows a genuine co-management of administrative and financial work (setting up of purchasing groups, expressions of interest, etc.)'; 'Cooperation and competition between authorities are ultimately incompatible when there is a loser. On the other hand, cooperation between authorities to compete against a phenomenon external to the territory (unemployment, desertification of territories, etc.) is essential.'

The survey thus confirmed that territorial cooptation is a reality, described and illustrated by a majority of respondents, although it is not always easy to achieve or sustain, especially when the number of stakeholders is important. Difficulties in implementation can build up, both in the organizational and financial fields and in the setting up of dossiers in view of the complexity of certain procedures. The exploratory case presented in the rest of the article shows how some obstacles can be overcome to implement cooptation in a territorial context.

*Exploratory study of a metropolitan cluster.* The aim of the second part of the research was to be rooted in the empirical reality, drawing on the principles of the case study as research material, in the sense of Yin (2009). Our study considered the same organization by examining it several times over a given period, in 2013, in 2015 and in 2016. The metropolitan cluster studied comprises four communities representing 139 communes with nearly 2 million inhabitants and 1 million jobs.

Below, we present the summarized testimony of a territorial leader<sup>8</sup> directly involved in the creation of this vast cluster. This material was supplemented by the study of internal documents on the cluster. The creation of the metropolitan cluster thus results from the grouping of four public establishments of inter-municipal cooperation (EPCI) which are situated in relatively close proximity but located in different *départements* and which can be considered as political rivals. These four establishments began to work together to create a metropolitan cluster in the Rhône-Alpes region, covering a population of 2 million inhabitants, on a discontinuous territory without common borders. This cooperation began in 2008 with inter-personal contacts between the presidents of intermunicipal associations: two left-wing representatives of the Socialist Party (Greater Lyon, St Etienne metropolis), joined by a right-wing UMP elected representative (community of Vienne) and by another elected president of the CAPI (Porte d'Isère urban area).

The metropolitan cluster effectively came into being in May 2012, with the official objective of giving the territory constituted by the union of the four EPCIs a status similar to a European metropolis, a critical size that none of the isolated partners could have reached alone. The cooperation process was initially based on informal meetings (presidents, directors-general of services), and then on the creation of structures for consultation with mixed groups of technicians-elected representatives, led by a duo from two different local authorities. Each of the four partners then appointed a vice-president in the new organization chart of the metropolis. At the executive level, representativeness in governance bodies was established on an egalitarian basis (one EPCI=1 vote), a principle respected regardless of the size of the urban area. The composition of the metropolitan council obeys the rules of proportional representation as required by the texts governing this category of EPCI constituted as a mixed union. In addition, a rotating presidency was established among the four partners with an equitable sharing of responsibilities in the various committees. The structure of the metropolitan cluster is very light, with four positions attached to the cluster and the partners provide five full-time equivalent positions. Any change in governance



must be decided unanimously, as stated by the Director-General of Services of the CAPI, one of the institutions concerned: 'A governance agreement exists between the four Presidents: all decisions on the extension of the cluster to a new member or on the adoption of a new field of action by the cluster must be taken unanimously. This is an essential part of the operation.'

In the Rhône-Alpes region, territorial authorities can consider the metropolitan cluster as the emergence of a new local political power. To avoid the risk of political instrumentalization, the metropolitan cluster has adopted a very flexible legal structure in which there is no transfer of competences. Institutions retain their prerogatives of responsibility within their sphere and the metropolis develops new prerogatives at the level of a wider sphere. Several actions have been included in the roadmap of the cluster: culture, transport, economy, etc. For example, the cluster enters into partnership with the Region to have a joint management union for public transport. Nevertheless, the relationship between the metropolitan cluster and the Region remains complex. At the national level, competition is exacerbated with the *départements* and regions, especially those that have not entered the system and who want to embody political leadership on a territorial scale.

Thus, the metropolitan cluster can appear both as a threat to the outside and as an opportunity for the partners inside. In particular, it responds to a real need for long-term cooperation between local authorities, beyond political rivalries, as the DGS further points out: 'The political changes following the March 2014 municipal elections did not call into question the functioning of the cluster and its principles. Yet three new Presidents and two changes of political affiliation were carried out . . . . However, after a few months of exchanges and interindividual and collective meetings, the four EPCIs reiterated their commitment on the same bases. A new agreement on the Presidency was adopted. The common weal prevailed!'

This description of an innovative process shows the complexity of relations between territorial authorities that combine various forms of cooperation and competition. This experience, while emblematic of a quite singular case, is not unique in the French territorial universe, however, where about 15 procedures are currently under way to form metropolitan clusters at different levels of completion.

*In-depth survey among 10 territorial leaders.* In September 2016, 10 territorial leaders familiar with the subject replied to a semi-directive interview guide focusing on the issues and methods of cooperation, the aim being to fine-tune and update the February 2013 survey. The following elements were ascertained:

- Cooperative competition is a reality for territorial authorities.

It begins in the governance of the territorial authorities themselves, two-headed by nature given that elected representatives representing citizens must deal with managers with technical and regulatory competence to implement public policies.

An ambivalent relationship is built up between the elected representatives and the administrators, based on competition in decision-making and cooperation in implementation, since the territorial leaders have no powers of their own and carry out their work as delegates of the elected representatives.

It continues through the necessary convergences between neighbouring territorial authorities that are administered by elected representatives of different political opinions, especially in the provinces. This is especially the case for competing authorities that will find agreements to jointly manage local services with heavy financial burden but with low political recognition, such as garbage collection, or public transport: 'Competition is natural in the political world within the same party and with the opposition party'. Cooperation is also inevitable, especially with the decline in the phenomenon of plurality of offices. The elected representatives must deal with the other holders of power. The extension of the territories with the merger of the Regions and, more generally, the recent NOTRe law (New Territorial Organization of the Republic) has accelerated the cooptation process, especially between large territorial authorities (metropolises, *départements* and Regions). Formal planning documents also play a role in bringing authorities closer together: 'All these phenomena have thus increased the necessary coexistence and the search for compromise, since the "defence communities" set up to resist the influence of the powerful urban authority or the larger community of communes next door, have disappeared in favour of a larger whole.'

- Democratic governance of cooptation is a key to success.

Among the examples of cooptation, intermunicipality is permanently in this situation. Political opposition and historical rivalries must be overcome to work in favour of the development of the common territory. But they persist and lead to the need for permanent regulation and mediation. Hence the importance of the equitable management of cooptation, which involves a fair distribution of powers, with the possibility of rotating the posts, and taking into account the real interests of each.

When it comes to the governance of a cooperative structure, it is therefore advisable to privilege a form of collaborative governance: rotating presidency for the symbol, cooperative and unanimous decision-making for efficiency and legitimacy, are essential to the proper functioning. 'In this way, in a strategy of cooptation with a common project, shared human resources (pooling), an equitable and relevant distribution of financial resources (fiscal and financial pact), the notion of competition has to subside. Authorities become partners in order to make a success of the common project that is essential to their own development. Political, personal or historical rivalries may remain, but no authority can refuse to work in synergy with its neighbours, except for those living in economic self-sufficiency.'

If it is a question of arbitrating on the objectives of the common territory, it is a question of pedagogy and collective intelligence. If it is a matter of arbitrating

between competing strategies of member authorities, it is necessary to return to the collective dialogue that forms the basis of the association.'

It is only through sharing and understanding strategic issues at the territorial level, through the confrontation of ideas, debates 'not on the basis of consensus but of consent' that arbitrating in the interest of the common good becomes possible and cooptation becomes sustainable.

## Discussion of the intermediary results of the research

Our research first reveals situations of competition between territorial authorities, in particular to capture resources, draw in citizens owing to the attractiveness of the local territory, obtain political power and territorial influence in local elections, or sometimes for more confused reasons. In this context, it is often useful for neighbouring territorial authorities subject to the same need for influence to group together to weigh in the balance of public decisions. Cooperative strategies are then developed in spite of the underlying competition. The cooptation processes at work within the authorities are often delicate, as some researchers have shown in other contexts (Yami et al., 2010).

Das and Rahman (2010), for example, consider that cooptation can be hijacked from its initial mission due to the uncertainty surrounding the sharing of responsibilities, evolving for the benefit of one partner to the detriment of others. This can happen when the opportunistic partner seeks to unilaterally increase the rewards it reaps from the benefits of cooperation by reducing its own obligations to contribute to the cooperation and by transferring the extra costs associated with its defection.

Along the same lines, Bengtsson and Kock (2000), distinguish three situations marking the failure or success of cooptation, transposable to public action:

- The cooptation strategy evolves towards systematic cooperation. In the long run, there may be a risk of undermining the general interest with a tacit agreement between local elected representatives to no longer compete at the time of the elections while preserving a local economic rent.
- The cooptation strategy remains balanced with an alternation of cooperation and competition. A balance is maintained to cooperate when it is necessary to achieve size effects in action and to compete when it is necessary to propose alternatives to the citizen according to political sensitivity. Therefore, the cooptation strategy can continue.
- The cooptative strategy tends to evolve towards systematic competition. In the end, there is a risk of deviance in action, with a situation of isolation of the authorities reinforced by the political confrontation of the elected representatives. These situations of conflict are notably observed when the electoral results and the local geography oppose the mayor of the commune-centre and the president of the community.

The example of the metropolitan cluster in the Rhône-Alpes region thus far illustrates a situation of balanced cooptation at the territorial level. Indeed, it is

designed to take advantage of economic complementarities between politically rival communities, without, however, generating additional costs, with the emergence of a redundant link in the territorial 'millefeuille'. Indeed, the umbrella structure of the metropolitan cluster is light enough not to be redundant. It respects the principle of subsidiarity, intervening only when it is possible to achieve economies of scale, to share a part of the costs, and to improve the attractiveness of the territory.

By striving to respect both the issues at stake for the elected representatives and the principles of general interest, coopetition between local authorities can take place in a harmonious manner, for example to share the investment burden in the fields of public transport or cultural action and where it is necessary to rationalize subsidies and optimize the use of local taxes. In this way, cooperation can lead authorities to reach a critical size in order to gain negotiating power when dealing with national and European suppliers, creditors and public authorities, who thus appear as secondary stakeholders, in the sense mentioned above.

According to the results of the exploratory study, reinforced by those of the complementary survey, the coopetition strategy can succeed when it is based on a democratic type of collegial governance, with a concern for equal representation between rival partners.

The crux of the matter is to achieve a balance in coopetition, which is not evident given the entanglement of territorial structures in France. In the case of the metropolitan regrouping, coopetition is managed in a way that seems relatively harmonious with regard to the inter-municipal partners, respecting the principle of subsidiarity of tasks and establishing democratic governance. Nevertheless, with the increase in size, regrouping potentially encroaches on certain areas of competence of the Region, as the two local structures of comparable size may overlap in certain public prerogatives. With the creation of the metropolitan cluster, the regional council could then lose influence with regard to the state and the citizen. Coopetition may thus reinforce the influence of the metropolitan cluster to the detriment of the Region, unless the conditions for harmonization between the Region and the regrouping of the 139 communes are restored. These results also illustrate the need to overcome paradoxes when the public sector tries to develop a form of management by meaning (Trosa and Bartoli, 2016), which may be the case in situations of territorial coopetition.

## **Conclusion**

Cooperative competition is an existing practice not only in the private sector, but also in the management of territorial authorities. Our research, based on a broad questionnaire survey, a case study and an in-depth study, shows that the theory deployed in private management on the subject of coopetition can be applied, subject to some adjustments, to the field of public management. Empirical evidence indicates that the political cooperation of rival authorities makes sense from the point of view of two scales of analysis: the global scale that encourages

communities to work together to enable the common good of the territory to thrive at national and international levels; and the local scale where it is legitimate for the democratic debate that local elected representatives come head to head in a local political competition. Under this condition, cooptation between local authorities goes beyond the apparent paradox of the phenomena of competition in the public sphere, which would conflict with cooperation. Indeed, it can be designed in the interests of the various primary and secondary stakeholders: public bodies to share costs, the citizen to preserve the proximity of elected officials, or the territory as a whole, to attract relevant actors and investors and safeguard jobs.

However, certain pitfalls in the management of cooptation should be avoided, based on certain principles set out in the literature and confirmed in our research. Within the scope of cooptation, it is advisable to establish local collaboration that brings added value to the territorial entanglement, in relation to the strata of proximity, without redundancy with regard to territorial strata on a more global level. In addition, a collaborative strategy should be pursued in peripheral areas of competence that are far removed from the concerns of elected representatives, in order to avoid situations of excessive rivalry between partners. The next step is to think about how to distribute tasks equitably between rival and partner authorities. This requires reflection on the governance of cooptation, which would be even more effective if accompanied by an analysis of the real motives and advantages of cooptation: the existence of a 'common adversary', the expression of a community of interests, and the presence of a leader that is a driving force but respectful of its allies. This governance must respect democratic principles, distributing power either in an egalitarian way regardless of the size and stakes of the partner, or in accordance with a balanced compromise between demographic or economic power and equality, by guaranteeing transparency of information, by favouring collegiality in decision-making, or by establishing a charter of rights and duties in order to guarantee confidence. Finally, when implementing cooptation, it appears advisable to separate the teams in charge either of technical collaboration or of political rivalry during election periods, in order to avoid conflicts of interest with regard to each authority. In other words, the ambivalence of cooptation could be seen as an asset and not as a constraint, at the service of the common good.

These results must be qualified because of the limitations of the case study, as, even if it is based on broader surveys, some aspects require more in-depth exploration. In particular, it would be useful to continue to analyse the conceptions and practices of cooperation/competition between the various stakeholders and, first and foremost, elected representatives, in order to better analyse the room for manoeuvre available to territorial authorities in this field. Given the particularities inherent in management processes in the non-market sector, it would also be necessary to specify the place of public service values in these approaches and to understand the role they can play in the specific nature of cooptation at territorial level. Finally, an international perspective would make it possible to relativize and put into perspective the case of France, through comparison with institutionally and culturally different systems.

## Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the ADT-INET Association of Local Authority Leaders, and in particular two of its members (Bruno Paumier and Frédéric Pin) for their important contributions to the content of this article.
2. The origin of the term ‘territorial millefeuille’ does not appear to be clearly established, but it may be related to a metaphor used by the political scientist Grodzins in 1960 to describe American federalism, contrasting, on the one hand, the image of ‘layer cake’ for dual federalism, established on the basis of a clarity of roles with little overlap between the local state and the federal state, and, on the other, the ‘marble cake federalism’ used as an image for cooperative federalism, advocating more mixed roles between the local and federal levels.
3. See in particular the recent book (2015) by Éric Giuily, *Maître des requêtes honoraires* at the Council of State, and Olivier Régis, Deputy Chairman of the Forum for the Management of Cities and Territories Authorities, whose title refers to this expression.
4. ADT-INET/LAREQUOI-ISM symposium ‘Quel rôle des managers dans la “coopétition” des territoires?’/The role of managers in territorial cooperation’ on 5 February 2013 at the Université de Versailles St-Quentin en Yvelines.
5. INET = (Institut National des Etudes Territoriales). Association ADT-INET: <http://www.adtinet.fr/>
6. The term ‘case study’ is used here by convention, in so far as a particular example of a territorial authority is presented and studied. The study remains exploratory and will require further exploration.
7. The 10 leaders are divided into three groups: one in an EPCI (public establishments of inter-municipal cooperation)/urban area, one in a management centre in Ile de France, two in a General Council, three in communes within the EPCI (urban communities or communities of communes), one in a commune within a metropolis.
8. Testimony gathered from the Director-General of Services of the CAPI, during three periods: in February 2013, in January 2015, and in September 2016, which allowed an analysis of the changes over time.

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