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# Through the prism of cognition: exploration of local political leaders' behaviour during incited voluntary municipal amalgamation

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## ABSTRACT

For decades, amalgamation has remained at the top of the international reform agenda. Seeking to enhance local governments' economic efficiency and democracy, municipal mergers were encouraged in numerous countries. However, the results of such reforms remain controversial. The paper aims to extend the understanding of reasons for municipalities' diverging responses to financial incentives under amalgamation. In this way, the study adds to local public administration literature, by showing the influence of psychological factors and individuals' cognition on the result of mergers in the context of two Ukrainian local governments.

**KEYWORDS** Amalgamation; reform; municipalities; political leaders; cognitive styles; Ukraine

## Introduction

Discussions on local public sector reforms have flourished for several decades (Garlatti, Fedele, and Iacuzzi 2020; Baldersheim and Rose 2010; Suzuki and Sakuwa 2016), revealing the multifaceted character of territorial reforms and their diverging trajectories internationally (Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann 2017; Bocchino and Padovani 2021). This study focuses particularly on amalgamation, due to the resulting substantial alterations expected at lower governmental levels (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019) and the restructuring of municipal activities (Kenk and Haldma 2019).

Amalgamation reforms vary, depending on the type of merger process. Voluntary or compulsory mergers are distinguished by whether municipalities have a choice regarding consolidating their units (Blesse and Baskaran 2016). These reforms are also known as top-down, if reinforced by central government, and bottom-up, if local authorities have freedom in the merging process (Dafflon 2013). Incited voluntary amalgamation reforms (IVARs) are

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usually attributed to bottom-up reforms, since the decision to amalgamate – and with which units – is made locally, despite the incentives being designed by upper governmental levels (Strebel 2018; Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019).

With growing academic interest in local government reforms, most publications have studied top-down amalgamations, concentrating on developed countries (Swianiewicz 2018; Swianiewicz and Szmigiel-Rawska 2020) and the contested effects that municipal mergers can bring to local populations (Suzuki and Sakuwa 2016; Dollery and Yamazaki 2018). This has resulted in a dominant focus on a macro-, ex post perspective to quantitatively analyse relationships between economic determinants causing or hindering mergers (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019; Strebel 2018). Consequently, a theoretically grounded micro-perspective on the role of local actors – political leaders – involved in mergers, their perceptions and behaviour, has been overlooked.

The paper suggests applying a cognitive theoretical framework to explore local political leaders' responses to IVAR. Focusing on how perceptual and cognitive processes affect decision-making (Wood and Bandura 1989), this perspective offers an alternative approach to study municipal amalgamation, by tracing variation in local actors' perception and behaviour when facing IVAR. This qualitative study is based on the data collected from interviews with representatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), local politicians, public managers, deputies and citizens from two neighbouring local governments in Southern Ukraine and supported by secondary data analysis.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the particularities of IVARs and the conditions influencing their implementation are outlined; cognitive theory is explained, further mapping possible explanations for divergent responses to municipal mergers. Next, the study's background is presented, followed by the methodology. Comparative findings from two amalgamation cases are then presented. The paper closes with a discussion, conclusion and further research directions.

## **Literature review**

### ***Conditioning factors of IVAR***

Seeking better value for money and efficiency in public service provision, municipal mergers were widely implemented under the New Public Management (NPM) agenda (Hood and Dixon 2015; Ferlie 2017). Particularities of IVAR derive from an ad hoc 'marriage bonus' (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019, 8), offered to municipalities, to motivate mergers. These incentives differ, depending on the mechanisms used – financial:

e.g., financial aid, debt relief or fiscal equalisation guarantees to reduce financial losses from amalgamation (Kaiser 2014) and non-financial: administrative support or consultancy services (Strebel 2018; Kaiser 2014). If following the public choice theory perspective, local actors' decisions, seeking maximisation of personal gains (Mueller 1976), should favour amalgamation, since it is expected to bring economic efficiency and managerial effectiveness (Hood 1991). However, in practice, local governments can oppose mergers (Strebel 2019), due to several endogenous factors.

Municipal mergers depend on mediating or 'filtering' factors (Askim et al. 2016) such as: (1) type of local political system (consensual or majoritarian); (2) level of political, financial and administrative independence; (3) local government size; and (4) stability of local government structure, leading to local identities and values becoming deeply rooted within municipal borders. However, these are not exhaustive. Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil (2019) suggested several endogenous political processes that might condition municipal mergers, particularly local power and consensus-building dynamics (e.g., actor constellations, level of political competition, media influence or use of democratic participation) and political steering of the reform process (e.g., political and fiscal concessions). Further, Strebel (2018) analysed the importance of local determinants during Swiss IVAR and differentiated between the functional dimension, including fiscal stress and population size, and the political dimension, featuring local identity and political power.

Participatory and democratic mechanisms were identified as significantly affecting IVARs, as they 'foster stakeholder integration, communication and cooperation' (Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann 2017, 108). Involving local civil servants from different departments, citizens, local service providers and even the media might contribute to diminishing opposition towards a merger. Similarly, the mayor's role is crucial in ensuring amalgamation. Broekema, Steen, and Wayenberg (2016) highlighted that, along with structural features (i.e., intergovernmental relations in a consensus-seeking way), local politics and identity, a political leader's will to support reforms particularly affects amalgamation. In addition to local leaders, other actors, e.g., civil servants in local executive bodies, elites, citizens and local media (Paddison 2004; Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann 2017) become involved in the amalgamation process. Given the divergence of interests, different groups' responses to reform incentives also diverge. For instance, unwilling to lose their status quo, local elites may resist mergers (Paddison 2004). Citizens often express fears regarding lower-quality public services, decreasing local autonomy and democracy or loss of local identity (cf., Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013; Boudreau 2003; Strebel 2018).

Table 1 summarises factors potentially conditioning the result of IVAR. With an extended debate on multiple factors, previous studies focused less on human agency's role during IVAR. Particularly, the role of local leaders – mayors – during amalgamation was mostly linked to political interests and

**Table 1.** Factors affecting voluntary municipal mergers.

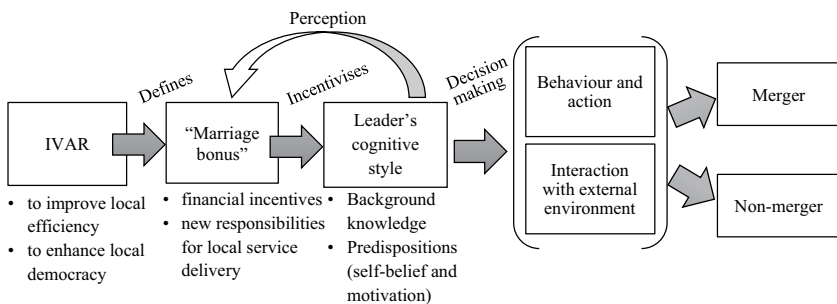
Conditions	Types	Examples	Literature
Exogenous	Financial	Financial aid; debt relief; fiscal equalisation guarantees	Kaiser (2014)
Endogenous	Non-financial	Administrative support; consultancy services	Strebel (2018); Kaiser (2014)
	Administrative	- Level of administrative independence; - Size of local government; - Stability of local government structure	Askim et al. (2016); Strebel (2018)
	Political/ power	- The type of local political system (consensual or majoritarian); - Local power and consensus-building dynamics (e.g., actor constellations, level of political competition, media influence) - Political steering of the reform process (e.g., appearance of political and fiscal concessions)	Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil (2019); Broekema, Steen, and Wayenberg (2016); Strebel (2018)
	Democratic Symbolic	- Political will of local leader/mayor - Stakeholder participation, integration, communication, cooperation - Local identities and values rooted within municipal boundaries	Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann (2017) Askim et al. (2016); Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013); Boudreau (2003); Strebel (2018)

power. Previous studies acknowledged the need for a more actor-centred approach (Strebel 2018) and, particularly one examining individual behaviour and decision-making (Strebel 2019), to form a more nuanced understanding of different responses to IVAR given similar incentives. This paper fills this gap by exploring how local political leaders perceive information, behave and interact with and within their communities during IVAR. The cognitive theoretical perspective further enables a deepening understanding of whether and how local actors' perceptions and behaviour may condition the divergence of local responses to IVAR.

### *Cognitive theoretical perspective*

Attracting more attention within economic disciplines (Armstrong, Cools, and Sadler-smith 2012), cognitive theory explores individuals' cognition, i.e., how knowledge is obtained and operationalised (Hayes and Allinson 1998). This perspective assumes that 'individuals do not act according to fixed patterns of behaviour but rather to impressions shaped by their social environment and their past as well as how they see their present and their future' (Wirtz et al. 2016, 1341). In the IVAR context, local political leaders receive information about financial incentives and analyse how reform can specifically influence their municipality. Since local leaders are heavily involved in the amalgamation process (Wollmann 2004), and their role in final decision-making on amalgamation is substantial (Broekema, Steen, and Wayenberg 2016), the focus on their cognitive biases can elucidate diverging responses to IVAR.

The cognitive perspective builds on the interrelation of three mutually shaped and interconnected aspects: a person's cognition, behaviour and external environment (Wood and Bandura 1989). These form the basis of our conceptual framework for exploring local political leaders' perceptions and behaviour during IVAR (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Cognitive theoretical perspective on IVAR process.

Of particular interest in studying individual cognition are cognitive styles, which describe 'differences in how we perceive, think, solve problems, learn, and relate to others' (Witkin et al. 1977, 29). Cognitive styles determine how an individual processes information (Walsh 1995) and forms a behavioural pattern of adaptation to the environment, which derives from personal predispositions and is modified by the changing environment (Kozhevnikov, Carol, and Kosslyn 2014). Cognitive peculiarities can relate to such personal predispositions as one's level of self-belief and motivation for setting goals (Wood and Bandura 1989). For instance, someone with low self-belief, lacking motivation, chooses to avoid challenges; conversely, someone with strong self-belief is motivated to master change (Bandura 2001). Although associated with an individual's personality and character (Eysenck 1995), cognitive styles are also shaped by experiences and knowledge gained throughout life. Some studies prove that individual style might be shaped by educational background (Sternberg 1997), job experience, position, competencies (Grønhaug and Mellemvik 1998) or gender. In one example of Japanese local governments (Suzuki and Avellaneda 2018), a decision maker's gender can affect behaviour in public finance. Thus, a cognitive style can be manifested through individual predispositions (self-belief and motivation) in reaching a certain future result, given obtained knowledge and past experiences.

Behaviour builds upon individual decisions, which as 'symbolic conceptions are translated into appropriate courses of action' (Wood and Bandura 1989, 362). Thus, an individual operationalises a decision through the prism of their own cognitive style, by framing the pattern of behaviour based on their mental model (Carroll and Bandura 1987; Bourmistrov 2017). Indeed, cognition is an important guide in regulating human behaviour, actions and interactions (Bandura 2001). At the same time, individuals do not exist in a vacuum. Environmental constituents, such as information complexity (Meynhardt, Hermann, and Anderer 2017), working (Armstrong and Priola 2001) or vocational (Furnham 2001) environments and cultural context (Savvas, El-Kot, and Sadler-Smith 2001), form social structures that operate interdependently, mutually shaped by individuals, their cognition and behaviour (Bandura 2001). Within environments requiring complex decision-making, such as mergers, which bring significant changes at the local level (Kenk and Haldma 2019), local leaders need to 'effectively process multi-dimensional information that contains ambiguities and uncertainties', to establish rules 'that enable them to predict and exercise influence over the collective effort' (Wood and Bandura 1989, 370). In this way, leaders use their cognitive styles to evaluate information about IVAR originating from the external environment and to interact with other local actors to manage collective action towards a decided goal.

To summarise, currently few academic studies of bottom-up reform strategies – particularly, incented amalgamations – (Strebel 2018) focus on local actors' behaviour to explain why some municipalities merge, while others resist. This study fills this gap by drawing attention to local leaders' cognition and behaviour. Before describing the research setting and methodological approach used to study two contrasting merger cases, the contextual background of IVAR in Ukraine is provided.

## Context

The Ukrainian administrative and territorial system has two layers: central and local government, the latter divided into three levels: upper, middle and primary. Units at the primary or municipal level include districts in cities, villages, townships and towns (i.e., cities without districts); the middle level has districts in regions and cities; and the upper level consists of regions.

Amalgamation reform was initiated in 2014 by the Ukrainian central government, after accepting the Concept of Reforming Local Self-Government and Territorial Organisation of Power in Ukraine (No. 333-p). The rationale for reform was driven by several challenges faced by local governments for nearly 24 years: poor-quality local services and shortage of financial resources at primary and middle levels. The concept was an impetus for several central governmental legislative initiatives under a 'decentralisation' banner, which became effective in 2015.

First, legislation touching administrative and territorial decentralisation was introduced, enabling the voluntary establishment of new local governmental units – amalgamated territorial communities (ATCs) – at the primary level. Complementing territorial restructuring, amendments addressed financial aspects of decentralisation and were made to the budgetary legislation. They served as a financial stimulus for local governments, since they offered an increase in local revenues but, simultaneously, transferred additional responsibilities to local authorities. Particularly, the extended revenue base of an ATC's budget included such new taxes:

- 60% of personal income tax;
- 100% of single tax;
- 100% of property tax (real estate, land, transport);
- 5% of excise tax from the sale of excisable goods;
- 25% of environmental tax;
- 100% of tax on profit of enterprises and financial institutions of communal ownership;
- state duty;
- payment for administrative services;
- parking and tourist fees.



Simultaneously, ATCs had to accept more responsibility for providing public services, for example, education, healthcare and social protection services; expenditure on culture and sports; enhancement of local economic potential; and more administrative services (e.g., property registration). This was an attempt to improve the quality, accessibility and performance of public services at the local level, which is in line with NPM (Vakkuri 2010).

Together, these legislative initiatives prepared the ground for IVAR. The initiative to amalgamate usually originated from local heads; on successful amalgamation, a municipality with a more developed infrastructure and capacity would become the centre of an established ATC.

## **Research setting, method and design**

### ***Selected cases and data sources***

For this study, two local governments – A (LGA) and B (LGB) – located within the same Southern Ukrainian region were chosen, showing diverging responses to IVAR. These were selected during initial observation of local governments' behaviour after the law on IVAR came into force. Research attention was attracted to LGA, which was among the first in the country to establish an ATC. Based on information from the Geoportal of Administrative-Territorial Structure of Ukraine (n.d.), the ATC comprised the town and 16 village councils, with an overall population of 34,000. In March 2019, the ATC added one more village council, increasing the number of villages to 31 and the population to almost 36,000. Further, it was interesting to observe that the relatively smaller neighbouring LGB (2015 population nearly 30,000 and 26 local units), which might have been assumed to be an easier case to amalgamate due to the lower number of residents and local units, up until 2019 had not started the amalgamation process. Importantly, at the time of launching IVAR, both local governments had deficit budgets, funded by upper-level units, meaning that IVAR incentives would have similar relevance to both LGA and LGB.

The study period was 2015–2019; primary data were gathered in 2019. When conducting qualitative studies of cognitive styles, researchers can face the challenge of dealing with people introspection, which can be addressed by combining several data collection techniques and data sources (Hindle 2004), thus providing better evidence on leaders' cognition and behaviour. For this study, a bricolage of interviews, documentary analysis and informal conversations was used. Thirteen semi-structured interviews with local politicians, civil servants and NGOs' representatives (Table 2) were conducted. Talking to other actors allowed the motivation behind local leaders' decisions to be verified and objective judgements of leaders' behaviour to be heard. As leaders can provide less critical self-assessments or answers that others

**Table 2.** The primary data.

	Interviewee	Approximate length (minutes)	Referring to
1	Local leader A (head of an ATC council)	50	LGA
2	Secretary of ATC council	45	LGA
3	Head of financial department	45	LGA
4	Expert of accounting and financial reporting department	60	LGA
5	Deputy of a town council	45	LGA
6	Local leader B (head of a town council)	40	LGB
7	Deputy 1 of a town council	60	LGB
8	Deputy 2 of a town council	60	LGB
9	Head of a village council (976 citizens)	50	LGB
10	Head of a village council (3000 citizens)	45	LGB
11	Former President of NGO "Association of Ukrainian Cities"	60	NGO
12	Member of the chairing committee of NGO "Institute of Civil Society"	60	NGO
13	Leading expert for municipal development of NGO "Reanimation Package of Reforms"	80	NGO

expect to hear (Riding and Rayner 2013), it is important to balance their views with evidence from the people around them. For this purpose, two informal group conversations of around 30 minutes with local citizens in LGA (four residents) and LGB (three residents) were conducted. These people were met in the same location that the interviews with local political leaders were organised (administrative buildings in LGA and LGB). These informal conversations enabled residents' opinions on local leaders' behaviour during amalgamation to be heard; that was crucial for extending the vision beyond the experience of a single individual (Hines 2000) and learning more about leaders-citizen interaction.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data collection was a two-stage process. The first stage involved interviews with representatives from NGOs, to better understand the IVAR specifics. Primary data were supported with secondary data analysis, namely: Ukrainian legislation, international reports, reports from NGOs and proceedings from conferences on decentralisation and amalgamation in Ukraine. When interviewing NGOs' representatives, the following were discussed: stages of IVAR and major changes that reform brought to local governments; how the reform was announced and how information reached local governments; how and why financial incentives should motivate local governments to merge; how municipalities select with whom to merge; the main benefits and threats for newly established ATCs.

The second stage involved interviews with actors from LGA and LGB. Depending on the interviewee's position, topics were slightly modified. For example, the following were selected when interviewing local leaders: when and how information about amalgamation was obtained and how it was

perceived; whether and how professional background helped in deciding upon the merger; how the merger decision was made, individually or collectively; the main actions and arguments for/against amalgamation; changes in practices and local reaction to these. Questions to other local actors touched upon locals' and leader's reaction to IVAR and further actions; local leader's interaction with other actors concerning amalgamation. During this stage, secondary data analysis was also conducted, including LGA and LGB budgets for 2015–2019, reports, local legislative acts, local leaders' CVs, newspaper articles and short videos about selected LGs. Some of the sources which were suggested by interviewees (e.g., local legislature, budgets, reports) helped to trace IVAR-related changes in LGA and LGB, while publications in the media were found independently and were used to cross-check gathered information from interviews and to obtain evidence on leaders' decisions during IVAR.

Studying decision-makers' perceptions and cognitive styles is challenging because they are inseparable from the individual (Bourmistrov 2017). Therefore, the analysis was conducted by investigating verbal expressions – leaders' language (Carley and Palmquist 1992) – practices, which represent 'materially mediated arrays of human activity' (Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny 2001, 2) and information gathered from secondary sources and other actors' statements. As this study focuses on 'language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), content analysis was used to analyse available data. Directed content analysis was employed, as the categories for coding were predefined based on the selected theoretical perspective (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Table 3 details the codes and data sources used for data analysis.

## Findings

### *Local leaders' cognitive styles in perceiving amalgamation*

When information about IVAR was disseminated among local governments in 2014, the first local actors in LGA and LGB to receive information about amalgamation were local political leaders – town mayors, both representing the biggest municipal units in their regional districts.

Education and work experience are among the preconditions for understanding and processing information (Bourmistrov 2017). While leader A had degrees in Economics and Public Administration, leader B had received technical education, complemented by additional training in public administration. Both had work experience in public service, having served twice as mayors. Despite differences in educational backgrounds, both political

**Table 3.** Coding and analysis of the data.

Theoretical concept (Code)	Traceable via	Reflected in data as
Cognitive style (CS)	Verbal expressions (interviews with leaders)	Perception of information
Background knowledge (BK)	Verbal expressions (interviews with local actors) Leaders' CVs, local news (secondary sources)	Comments on local leaders' reaction to information on IVAR Education and work experience
Predispositions (P)	Verbal expressions (interviews with leaders)	Self-belief and motivation
Behaviour (B)	Practices and verbal expressions (interviews with leaders and local documentation) Practices and verbal expressions (interviews with local actors)	Actions (approval of formal local legislature; informal meetings) of leaders as an operationalised decision about amalgamation Perception of local leaders' actions by local actors
Interaction with external environment (EE)	Practices and verbal expressions (interviews with leaders) Practices and verbal expressions (interviews with local actors)	Interactions between leaders and actors to enable/constrain collective action

leaders confirmed that they were well acquainted with IVAR and the expected changes to local government. The quotations below demonstrate their judgements of IVAR.

Leader A stated:

When I heard about the reform, I understood it as a chance for us to increase our economic potential. Of course, amalgamation will not make us immediately rich, and, yes, we will have more responsibility for education, healthcare, etc., which were dramatically underfinanced and now require significant investments. However, thanks to additional taxes the ATC can receive, if we plan our budget strategically and put effort into reviving local enterprises and attracting investments, we will build a prosperous community. Another big advantage is the ATC's financial independence, which means we won't need to apply for funding at a [regional] district level anymore and will be able to autonomously manage the ATC's finances. Thus, the first thing I did after the legislation became effective was to file an official document with a merging initiative. (Interviewee 1)

Meanwhile, leader B expressed scepticism:

I don't see the point in raising this [merger] question. OK, the budget structure will change, but how will we operate if all municipalities have a deficit? I am aware of public finances; I haven't met anyone willing to invest money here, and without external funds we will not be able to survive. I think it's better to receive financial support from the regional district budget than to take on responsibilities we won't be able to meet. I know that some merged municipalities are happy about this. But, in our case, a feather in the hand is better than a bird in the air. (Interviewee 6)

Comparing these perceptions shows that leader A considered incentives a financial opportunity for their community, whereas leader B perceived them as a threat. Both expressed awareness about changes in local finances, confirming that leaders' background knowledge was not critical in forming their perceptions. Such divergence is largely linked to leaders' predispositions – belief in self-efficiency and motivation to achieve a goal (Wood and Bandura 1989).

Leader A described amalgamation as a '*chance for us all to live better*' (Interviewee 1), arguing that an ATC would have more financial flexibility in terms of spending the local budget surplus generated from personal income tax (the main source of an ATC's revenue). He expressed strong confidence in financial opportunities and, as a highly efficacious individual, mentioned the success scenario of amalgamation (Wood and Bandura 1989), i.e., improved quality of local public services, attracting external investments and independence from the upper-level governmental budget. Contrastingly, despite acknowledging the possible benefits and experience of other merged governments, leader B made inefficacious judgements and stressed potential losses, wanting to neither risk the current state of affairs nor make an effort to attract external funds, stating that '*there are none*' (Interviewee 6).

The results of amalgamation were differently represented by local leaders' cognition and, accordingly, 'converted into [...] motivators and regulators of behaviour' (Bandura 2001, 7). The difference in leaders' anticipatory self-guidance, based on anticipated results of amalgamation, formed divergent behavioural patterns, manifested further in interactions with other actors. Local town council deputies were also engaged in amalgamation, as they must approve the local leader's merger initiative and set the conditions for public hearings regarding potential amalgamation. This group of actors also reacted differently to amalgamation. As one LGA deputy (Interviewee 4) stated: *'Our mayor's proposition was motivating and assertive; he explained in detail the importance of this change. After discussions, we supported his vision'*. In the case of LGB, discouraged by their mayor's arguments (Interviewee 7), most local deputies were not engaged in discussions about a potential merger. Nevertheless, despite being one of the most common options, it is not only one leader who can initiate a merger. This initiative can also derive from local councils or residents (Sørensen 2006; Ruus 2011). In Ukraine, according to the Law 'On Voluntary Amalgamation', a merger can be initiated by a minimum of one third of a municipality's deputies. Yet, most town deputies in LGB did not support amalgamation. An opposing Interviewee 8 critically suggested: *'The way our mayor thinks will never bring any improvements to our community. I think he discourages people from developing [our community]. Every discussion about mergers would be positioned by the mayor as impossible for our community.'*

After his initiative to create an ATC was approved by the town council, leader A engaged the members of the town's executive committee to *'foresee potential resistance from citizens'* (Interviewee 1). Besides benefits brought by financial incentives, the amalgamation process had another important detail of concern. Although local authorities recognised the benefits of merging, they could not merge simply based on their administrative decision. According to the law, an ATC can be established only after representatives (including local elites, residents, local businesses) from other municipalities agree to amalgamate. Thus, local gatherings and discussions with citizens in other municipalities, with their own interpretation of the merger, were organised.

Leader A effectively coordinated the executive committee's work to prepare themselves to meet residents from other territorial units. During visits to all the villages in LGA, the leader and executive committee members explained what could be expected from amalgamation and answered questions from residents. The most common concerns expressed locally were: (1) shutting down schools, healthcare centres, libraries, etc. and (2) what would happen to those people, if they lost their jobs. Based on budgetary information, some of these institutions were financially inefficient, and locals thought they would lose access to services. For example,

few pupils in a village school could be a reason to close the building and transfer the children to another school, which might be far away, or to close a costly culture house, which for years had been a *'symbol of local traditions'* (Interviewees 9 and 10). A similar issue was highlighted by Swianiewicz (2010), who emphasised that local administrative buildings, e.g., town halls, represent the centre of a local community, thus creating a feeling of local identity among the population. During public debates, leader A assured residents that no single building would close, and that those people who might lose jobs would be re-employed. Leader A mentioned: *'People perceive a village without a place where they receive basic daily public services as a human without a heart. They would feel themselves abandoned and their social life would be damaged. I promised to do everything to maintain their comfort and improve the quality of local services, and I will keep my word.'* This characterises leader A as both self-efficacious and confident in achieving the goal.

After public discussions in villages, leader A gained people's trust. As several locals confirmed (Informal group conversation 1): *'He is a professional. He understands how to govern the local community, he knows the laws, how to manage money. And, most importantly, he can find words to explain to us, regular people without economic education, why things need to change. He is honest and we trust him.'*

In the case of LGB's town head and locals, the opposite occurred. Arguing that there was no feasible way for the community to sustain itself in the case of a merger, leader B did not place amalgamation on the agenda for local discussions. He considered lack of investment the reason for the shortage of financial resources and, consequently, chose to stay subordinated to regional district authorities. Consequently, local actors critically evaluated LGB's leader's position and did not perceive amalgamation as a potentially beneficial change.

Why should we amalgamate with a leader who has no will to fight against difficulties? Our village has its culture house and kindergarten, it has beautiful nature and rich history. We do not want to sacrifice this in the name of an 'experiment' [amalgamation] that might not bring us any good. (Interviewee 10)

To summarise, analysing local leaders' perceptions of the reform explains why they behaved differently – to initiate or reject amalgamation. Despite different educational backgrounds, both leaders had work experience in public administration, since both had been elected mayors twice. Leader A perceived amalgamation as a financial opportunity for their community and communicated his arguments to the deputies and other municipalities. In contrast, leader B perceived the merger as a threat and highlighted the reform's challenges, thus demotivating other local actors regarding amalgamation.

### ***Operationalisation of leaders' decisions via new practices and interactions***

As a result of leader A's efforts, in 2015, 30 villages agreed to merge with the town, thus de jure creating an ATC, with the town as its centre. Shortly after the local elections in the new ATC and leader A becoming its head, he engaged in restructuring the environment through new practices and interactions.

First, before amalgamation, municipalities expressed strong concern about shutting down public entities. Leader A and executive committee members reflected on how to preserve local public entities and working places. This would require significant optimisation, due to *'the low economic efficiency and quality provided in local public entities'* (Interviewee 5). The solution suggested by leader A was to link related public services in neighbouring villages which were geographically convenient for local citizens, optimising costs and strengthening links between villages.

I promised to save everything people valued so much. After amalgamation, we did not close a single unit, but, of course, we had to think about restructuring them. For instance, we established cultural-educational networks between villages, thus connecting schools, kindergartens and cultural houses to cooperate in jointly providing a wider variety of educational services. Additionally, for several years already, we had used a part of our budget surplus to repair schools, update equipment in hospitals and modernise the facilities. (Interviewee 1)

Second, several democratic instruments were introduced, involving citizens from different villages in the local governance process. For instance, leader A proposed participatory budgeting: a new practice appearing among Ukrainian municipalities in 2015. Thus, local citizens had the opportunity to develop projects that could be funded from the ATC budget for such activities as landscape development, recreation, reconstructions, sport activities and development of the educational, cultural and innovation potential of the ATC (Interviewee 4). Also, during the budgetary process, the budget committee identified spheres, namely education and healthcare, which should be financed in the short term and those for which a longer perspective can be taken, for example culture. Importantly, such decisions were made following public hearings of the budget, allowing village representatives to voice their needs. Therefore, villagers became more active in developing local projects and participating in public budget hearings. Another democratic instrument was the establishment of a 'youth council' in 2016, to motivate young people (mostly high school students) from different amalgamated villages to participate in and learn more about local governance.

The 'youth council' is our local invention. There, we exchange ideas and listen to suggestions from the younger generation on new public activities, for example ecological projects, information and technological advancement. We also carry



out vocational guidance. Depending on the younger people's current interests, we organise visits to hospitals, police or fire stations, etc. We hope to share knowledge and motivate our children to contribute to the development of the ATC. (Interviewee 2)

Finally, leader A suggested investing financial resources in collective events, gatherings and inclusive activities. Several departments within the ATC's executive committee, e.g., Social Policy; Healthcare; Education; Civil Society Development; Family, Youth and Sport, were appointed by leader A to organise collective activities.

As an ATC, we received enough administrative and financial independence to develop and diversify social life. For example, we reconstructed a local stadium and now organise sport competitions for local and international teams in basketball and volleyball. We conducted an academic competition for pre-school children. We prepared an almost 150-metre-long table, full of dishes of Ukrainian cuisine. Our ATC was the first in the region to renovate a local cinema. Besides cultural and sport activities, we care about citizens with special needs and annually finance activities for people with disabilities and retired military officers. (Interviewee 2)

Thus, leader A introduced the following practices: activating new participatory mechanisms (participatory budgeting and youth engagement), restructuring the municipal system of providing public services and organising collective cultural events. Local actors, both at the level of ATC's governance and local residents, were actively engaged in implementing and supporting these activities.

LGB's case showed that the behaviour of most local actors remained the same. As leader B commented:

I know that other municipalities' budgets increased, but this does not mean that ours will. We do not have that many active enterprises in our territories to generate personal income tax. There is no money in our town budget to spend on resurrecting production lines, e.g., production of juices, tinned food, etc., which we had before, or to develop natural resources in our area. And as I said, no investors willing to sacrifice their money.

This shows that the local mayor only refers to the lack of financial means, and his perception of amalgamation as a threat, which was articulated to the local executive committee and deputies, has not changed over time. As most local actors did not consider amalgamation a beneficial change, no actions towards creating an ATC were initiated. As an LGB deputy (Interviewee 8) explained:

I understand why locals refuse to amalgamate – there is no clear amalgamation strategy, no explanations of how local needs will be addressed. There is not even any dialogue with the local population! The easiest thing is to say: 'We don't have enough funds', but this way of thinking will never bring any improvements.

## Discussion

Public management researchers' interest in territorial reform has been increasing, as more countries decide to undertake municipal amalgamation to achieve economies of scale, functional and managerial impacts or democratic outcomes (Tavares 2018). With diverging approaches to reform and varying results among countries (Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann 2017), the academic debate has mainly focused on quantitative analysis of amalgamation reform results, particularly on financial aspects, e.g., spending per capita, tax and budget cuts (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019). Furthermore, most studies depicted experience from North-Western Europe, where compulsory amalgamation was a more common approach (Swianiewicz 2018). Substantially fewer studies focused on local determinants of amalgamation reform (Strebel 2018), implemented in a bottom-up way, providing more space for theoretical contribution (Swianiewicz 2018), specifically those launched in Eastern European countries (Kenk and Haldma 2019). Another stream of public management literature discussed various aspects of decision-making in the public sector (Crowder 2015; Schmidt 2021), analysed and classified public servants' mental models (Bourmistrov 2017) and examined local leadership's role during public sector change (Bochel and Bochel 2010). However, local leaders' cognitive processes when deciding about IVAR have not yet been properly examined.

Amalgamation is a complex process, bringing significant alterations in local practices (Ebinger, Kuhlmann, and Bogumil 2019) and engaging multiple sets of actors, e.g., mayors, deputies and citizens (Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann 2017), whose perceptions of the reform can also diverge. This study contributes to the literature by explaining diverging IVAR trends through the exploration of local leaders' cognitive styles and behavioural patterns (Table 4).

Following the process of IVAR, this study suggested that cognitive style affected the merger or non-merger decision. Leaders' cognitive style is framed around previously obtained knowledge (education and working experience) that provides the basis for people's judgements, self-efficacy and motivation to achieve set goals. Remarkably, for leaders A and B, background knowledge obtained during their education was not critical in forming their perceptions of IVAR. Both confirmed that they were well acquainted with it and expected changes to their local governments, as they had appropriate experience in public administration.

The most prominent difference was observed in the leaders' initial predispositions, which shaped contrasting cognitive styles. To varying degrees, individuals are 'self-reactors with a capacity to motivate, guide and regulate their activities' (Bandura 1999, 27). Leader A followed the pattern of a highly efficacious individual by visualising success scenarios, believing in his ability



**Table 4.** Comparison of local leaders' cognitive styles, behaviour and interaction during IVAR.

	Leader A	Leader B
Cognitive style	Opportunity seeking	Threat avoiding
Background knowledge	Economic education Experienced in public service	Technical education Experienced in public service
Predispositions	High self-efficacy High motivation	Low self-efficacy Low motivation
Perception Arguments	Amalgamation is a financial opportunity (1) Higher quality of public services (2) Increase in external investments (3) Budgetary (hierarchical) independence and flexibility	Amalgamation is a financial threat (1) Limited number of active enterprises in the area (2) Low interest from external investors (3) High financial risks
Decision Behaviour (operationalised decision)	Creation of the ATC - Preservation of public entities in villages, financing them and updating their material base - Establishment of networks of public service providers	Maintenance of unamalgamated municipalities - Maintaining existing practices - Limited focus on development
Interactions with other actors	- Organisation of public gatherings, festivals and competitions - Motivating local deputies - Creating team of qualified experts to enact changes - Gaining trust of local citizens	- Demotivating local deputies and members of executive committee - Ignoring critics from local actors supporting amalgamation - No interaction with other municipalities and local residents
Result	Innovative approaches to local governance, democratic and participative practices in established ATC	Collective inaction and continuation of previous practices in unamalgamated municipalities

to overcome potential challenges (e.g., citizens' fears of amalgamation) and preserving motivation, while moving towards the set goal. Leader A evaluated IVAR as an opportunity to improve local governance and had a vision of how to use financial incentives in the case of amalgamation. This combination of predispositions formed an opportunity-seeking cognitive style. In the contrasting case, mayor B interpreted IVAR as a threat, confirming his low self-efficacy, foreseeing a negative scenario. This can also be linked to representative heuristic, which builds upon individual representation of the results based on the available evidence (Tversky and Kahneman 1973). Leader B focused on the financial challenges associated with amalgamation, and, since 'it requires a strong sense of efficacy to deploy one's cognitive resources optimally and to remain task oriented' (Wood and Bandura 1989, 371), he argued that LGB is poor and unattractive to potential investors, forming a threat-avoiding cognitive style.

After receiving information about IVAR, local leaders chose different approaches to proceed with mergers. Identified cognitive styles shaped local leaders' behavioural patterns and interaction with other local actors. Recognising that multiple local actors are engaged in the amalgamation process (Schwab, Bouckaert, and Kuhlmann 2017), leader A fostered collective agency, operated through 'shared beliefs of efficacy, pooled understandings, group aspirations' (Bandura 1999, 21). This was done by motivating civil servants and finding the right arguments for locals, to gain their support and trust in implementing amalgamation. Moreover, leader A introduced several innovative practices after the merger, while leader B behaved in a discouraging and demotivating way, limiting interaction with the surrounding environment. The findings underlined that one leader's cognition and subsequent behavioural patterns can influence other actors and result in collective action towards IVAR or inaction and continuation of previous practices. Thus, local leaders can use IVAR as an opportunity to master both evolutionary and revolutionary changes in their territorial units by accommodating 'conflicting alignments for innovation and efficiency' (O'Reilly and Tushman 2013, 327).

## Conclusions

Given recent pleas for more actor-centred studies of municipal merger dynamics (Strebel 2018; Swianiewicz 2018), the cognitive theoretical perspective (e.g., Bourmistrov 2017; Hall 2016; Bourmistrov and Kaarbøe 2013) was mobilised to take a nuanced picture of micro-processes, by studying the perceptions, decision-making (Schacter, Gilbert, and Wegner 2008; Frederick 2005), verbal expressions and actions that are influenced by human mental

processes (Baron 2004). Thus, this study contributes to the local government literature by highlighting the role of local leaders' cognition as a factor that can condition the result of voluntary amalgamation.

Empirically, this qualitative comparative study focused on local leaders' cognitive styles, behaviour and interaction with the external environment during IVAR in two Ukrainian local governments. The paper concludes that local leaders' cognitive styles – opportunity-seeking and threat-avoiding – depended upon their predispositions. How leaders perceived reform incentives and further operationalised their decisions about amalgamation depended on the level of self-efficacy and motivation. The findings showed that behavioural patterns formed by cognitive styles affected other actors, resulting in collective efforts towards change or collective inaction.

This paper also makes practical contributions. It highlights the necessity for reformers to consider that individuals do not always follow fixed patterns of behaviour (Downs and Stea 2005), meaning that financial incentives do not guarantee the success of amalgamation reform. Therefore, psychological aspects of local leaders' behaviour, the way they analyse and interpret information, can either facilitate or constrain municipal mergers. Addressing this issue might require central government's investment in training and communication with local governments in the early stages of reform.

Despite providing valuable insights, this paper has several limitations, opening new directions for studying voluntary amalgamations. First, the paper qualitatively analysed only two cases of amalgamation, which, in common with the qualitative type of research, does not make generalisation possible. Thus, future studies could benefit from experimenting with methodological approaches, e.g., conducting multiple case studies (qualitative and quantitative) on psychological factors affecting amalgamation. Second, the paper focused mostly on two local leaders, thus ignoring other actors engaged in the merger process. Researchers could advance further, by studying the changing roles, interests and power of a wider set of actors. Finally, alternative theoretical lenses, such as institutional work or identity dynamics, could be applied, to extend knowledge about and links between the responses to, processes and results of amalgamation reforms.

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