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# Governance in Europe: insights from a survey among actors involved in local state-society relations

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article presents results of an empirical study on local governance in a number of European countries carried out by a group of scholars who has conducted surveys of various local political actors for many years. The results of these studies, which have been published in two books, will be assessed with regard to central questions of the governance debate. These include, among other things, questions of the understanding of democracy as well as the representational claims of the social actors involved. Moreover, it is emphasised that surveys are central to finding out how actors assess institutional conditions under which they have to act, i. e. how they perceive institutional opportunities and limitations for their political choices.*

**Keywords:** local governance; local state-society relations; legitimacy claims; representative claims; notions of democracy.

**SUMMARY:** 1. INTRODUCTION.—2. INSIGHTS ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN EUROPE: 2.1. Looking for different ties in European local governance linking local state and society. 2.2. The views on local state-society relations from the perspective of the actors involved. Results of the survey.—3. CONCLUSION: SURVEYS AS A USEFUL INSTRUMENT FOR ACTOR-CENTRED APPROACHES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDIES AND URBAN RESEARCH.—4. BIBLIOGRAPHY.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

By the mid-1980s at the latest, the term «governance» found its way into academic debates on local government and politics. It was not only the emergence of a new term, it also shifted scientific interest. The focus of the academic debate was no longer on the municipal council and what happens in town hall. With the emergence of the term *local governance*, the emphasis shifted more and more to the interaction of municipal councils (councillors) and the municipal administration (more precisely, its senior staff) with actors linked to different spheres of the local community - both in terms of local political decisions and the local implementation of policies (JOHN, 2001).

This *governance turn* —or the *shift from government to governance*— was conceptually based, particularly at the beginning, on a rigorous distinction between government and governance. Societally binding decision-making was not only be seen as a matter of majority resolutions of elected representative bodies and through hierarchical administrative intervention legitimised by decisions of democratically elected representative authorities. Instead, the governing modes of *majoritarian decisions* and *hierarchy* have been seen in complementarity with mutual agreements among elected politicians and between them and societal actors reached by *bargaining* and *arguing* as newly emphasised governing modes (HEINELT, 2010: 15-27).

This was nothing new for research on local government and politics in the Anglo-Saxon world. There, such an approach trying to answer the question «Who governs?» without looking only at local government had already been developed with community power studies since the early post-war period (for an overview see SMITH, 1980) and later on with the urban regime theory (see MOSSBERGER and STOKER, 2001). The same applies to countries that are strongly influenced by social science research approaches from the Anglo-Saxon world - such as the Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands. And even in Germany, the Working Group on Local Policy Research (*Arbeitskreis Lokale Politikfortschung/LoPoFo*) was founded within the German Association for Political Science (*Deutschen Vereinigung für Politikwissenschaft*) in 1972 with the aim of «liberating local politics from the ghetto of municipal political systems defined by the institutions of local self-administration» (GRAUHAN, 1975: 12; translated by the author), which it subsequently also successfully pushed forward (HEINELT, 2004).

However, the more the term «local governance» became established in research on local government and politics —and this also in other parts of the world— the more the strict distinction between government and governance made at the beginning of the governance turn became lost. As a result, the term «governance» is often used in the sense of governing public affairs in general. With this general sense of governance as governing answers to the question emphasised by the governance turn get blurred - namely who governs how in which policy domain in a societally binding way.

In order to address the question of who governs how in which policy domain in a societally binding way in various European countries, a group of researchers has conducted a research project over several years. In this research project, local governance

arrangements were not only compared between different European countries, but also between policy fields in individual countries. To make it clear from the outset that these governance arrangements involve networks between elected local politicians and representatives of the municipal administration as well as societal actors, the term *local state-society relations* was used. Furthermore, the following has to be noted:

«First, societal actors are regarded as both “organized interests —ranging from chambers of commerce and industry etc., to differently organized associations with various kinds of membership (from enterprises to elderly people)— as well as individuals engaged in the policy process” (TELES *et al.*, 2021b: 2). Second, the analysis is focused on the municipal level of local government. Hence, institutionalized relationships are considered only to the extent to which the diversity of actors included interacts with municipalities (TELES *et al.*, 2021b: 3). Finally, “institutionalized interactions between representatives of municipalities (mayors, councilors and members of the municipal administration) and societal actors” (*ibid.*) are taken as the unit of analysis. This means that occasional and intermittent interactions —often with the goal of gathering the opinion of experts and societal actors— are not included in the analysis» (EGNER *et al.*, 2022b: 2).

Two books have resulted out of this research project. The first one (TELES *et al.*, 2021a) looks for different ties in European local governance linking local state and society. Therefore, a framework for analysing these local state-society relations was developed. On its basis such governance arrangements from 22 European countries were presented and characterised which «were to be [considered] either typical for local state-society relations in the country or display characteristics that other networks in the country also have» (EGNER *et al.*, 2022b: 2). The first book ended with comparative conclusions related to the findings presented in the country chapters of this book (HEINELT *et al.*, 2021). The purpose of the first book was not least to determine and present local state-society relations, whose members were to be surveyed with an online questionnaire jointly developed and then also used by the project partners. Results of this Europe-wide survey are presented in a second book (EGNER *et al.*, 2022a). By this survey responses from about 11,700 people participating in 68 institutionalised local state-society relation in 20 European countries could be collected (for more details on the survey, cfr. EGNER *et al.*, 2022b: 3-4).

The following section will only summarise some of what is presented in these two books - divided according to their particular contents. Their full reading can only be recommended. The final section summarises insights from this project that seem relevant to the discussion on local governance as well as local government.

## 2. INSIGHTS ON LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN EUROPE

### 2.1. Looking for different ties in European local governance linking local state and society

From the beginning, the aim of the project was to conduct a survey of actors involved in socio-state-society relations in the European countries surveyed, in order to

learn their assessment of how these governance arrangements function and affect outcomes, but also of their legitimacy. It was also clear from the outset that —as just mentioned— only local state-society relationships should be considered that are «either typical for local state-society relations in the country or display characteristics that other networks in the country also have» (EGNER *et al.*, 2022b: 2). Both the characteristics of these networks and the responses of their members included in the survey were to be compared. For these comparisons, it was seen as indispensable to have criteria that could be used for this purpose.

The typology of SELLERS *et al.* (2020; see also SELLERS and KWAK, 2011 as well as SELLERS and LIDSTRÖM, 2014) on national infrastructures of local governance seemed initially to be a promising tool for this purpose because it «aims at establishing a theoretical link between the institutions of local government and the organization of civil society» (TELES *et al.*, 2021b: 7). However, «the partners decided not to use this typology because it became obvious that in a country, policy-specific, local state-society relations can exist which can show different network characteristics from those attributed to the "national infrastructures" for local governance distinguished by SELLERS *et al.*» (TELES *et al.*, 2021b: 7-8). Therefore, it was decided to use a typology of different networks of local state-society relations elaborated by TELES (2021) and presented in Chapter 2 of the first book.

Starting from the «grid-group method» developed by DOUGLAS (1978; 2007), TELES argues that every network of local state-society relations can be characterised by its degree (high vs. low) of *autonomy* from external influence (particularly from upper levels of government) and coherence of the actors involved, *i. e. group coherence*. Furthermore, TELES adds a distinction - namely «how much impact [a network] can have and how relevant this impact is» (TELES, 2021: 25). By distinguishing between the degree (high vs. low) of autonomy, group coherence and relevance, a typology was constructed that conceptually draws clear lines between eight types of local state-society relations. The following figure gives an overview of these types of networks and their naming (labels).

**FIGURE 1.** THE THREE DIMENSIONS FOR CHARACTERISING LOCAL STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS AND THEIR RELATION AS WELL AS THE NAMES OF THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF NETWORKS

<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Group coherence</i>	<i>Relevance</i>	<i>Type of network</i>
High	High	Yes	Consociational
High	High	Low	Collaborative
High	Low	Yes	Independent
High	Low	Low	Communicative
Low	High	Yes	Delegated

<i>Autonomy</i>	<i>Group coherence</i>	<i>Relevance</i>	<i>Type of network</i>
Low	High	Low	Self-Reflective
Low	Low	Yes	Influencer
Low	Low	Low	Ceremonial

Adopted version of the figure presented in EGNER *et al.*, 2021: 36.

The three dimensions of this typology have been operationalised in detail by EGNER *et al.* (2021), so that they can be measured. This makes it possible to capture within-country variation in institutional arrangements which establish and regulate local state-society networks.

On this basis country chapters on local state-society relations were written for Austria (by Werner Pleschberger), Flanders/Belgium (by Koenraad de Ceuninck and Tom Verhelst), Croatia (by Ivan Koprić, Dubravka Jurlina Alibegović, Romea Manojlović Toman, Dario Čepo and Sunčana Slijepčević), the Czech Republic (by Jakub Lysek and Dan Ryšavý), England (by Alistair Jones and Colin Copus), Finland (by Linnéa Henriksson), France (by Deborah Galimberti), Germany (by Björn Egner, Hubert Heinelt and Detlef Sack), Greece (by Panagiotis Getimis), Iceland (by Grétar Þór Eyþórsson and Eva Marín Hlynsdóttir), Ireland (by Paula Russel), Italy (by Annick Magnier and Marcello Capria), Latvia (by Iveta Reinholde, Inese Āboliņa and Malvine Stucka), Lithuania (by Jurga Bučaitė-Vilkė and Aiste Lazauskiene), the Netherlands (by Hans Vollaard), Norway (by Karin Fossheim), Poland (by Adam Gendźwiłł, Joanna Krukowska and Paweł Swianiewicz), Portugal (by Luís Mota, Patrícia Silva and Filipe Teles), Romania (by Cristina Stănuș and Daniel Pop), Spain (by Carmen Navarro and Lluís Medir), Sweden (by Anders Lidström and David Feltenius), and Switzerland (by Oliver Dlabac). In these country chapters the selected governance arrangements are described and characterised according to the typology outlined before. It would be going too far to go into the rich information about the local state-society relations in detail, which is provided in the chapters on these countries. Instead, results of comparative analyses will be summarised in the following part of this section of the article, which are laid out in the final chapter of the book by HEINELT *et al.* (2021).

This concluding chapter starts by an examination whether the conceptual characterisation of local state-society relations by their autonomy, coherence and relevance according to the typology developed by TELES (2021) and their operationalisation and measurement presented by EGNER *et al.* (2021) can be confirmed empirically. The answer given by HEINELT *et al.* (2021) is without ambiguity: The «results [presented in the country chapters] indicate that the network types of local state-society relations are clearly distinguishable» as conceptionally differentiated by TELES.

The rest the chapter deals with the question of how differences among the networks of local state-society relations presented in the country chapters can be explained: Do

countries matter in respect to the differences detected among local state-society relations - and by this also «national infrastructures» for local governance arrangements as suggested by SELLERS *et al.* (2020)? Furthermore, the question was examined whether policy domains matter for the identified differences of local state-society relations. Finally, the question was addressed whether local state-society relations differ due to their functions and the form of the participation of societal actors in these networks. Although the authors show that local state-society relations differ in terms of certain policy domains, functions of the networks and also the form societal actors can participate, they strongly emphasised that

«clear “functionalist” explanations —following, for example, LOWI’s (1972: 299) dictum “policies determine politics” or reflections that a certain policy needs particular “policy institution” to be effective— are hardly convincing, as it can be shown that there are remarkable differences in local state-society relations even within the same policy domain [such as in Local Action Groups/LAG; see also below]. This finding requires explanations that do not refer to clear determinant effects emanating from a particular policy. [Instead] tentative explanations are [suggested by the authors] by referring to an actor-centered approach in line with the discursive institutionalism (SCHMIDT 2008; 2010) in general and the role of upper-level government and of local actors in particular» (HEINELT *et al.*, 2021: 380-381).

The specific role of local actors depends primarily on their will and ability «to take advantage of given institutional opportunities to increase or decrease, to a certain degree, the autonomy, coherence and relevance of the governance arrangements [in] which they have to interact» (HEINELT *et al.*, 2021: 405).

With regard to the point just mentioned, the authors admit that «[o]ur knowledge in this respect is still limited and requires further studies comparing particular networks and reconstructing the motivation and role-perceptions of the members involved» (HEINELT *et al.*, 2021: 405). To reconstruct the motivation and role-perceptions of the actors participating in institutionalised local state-society relations, but also, for instance, their perceptions of the autonomy, coherence and relevance as well as of the legitimacy of these governance arrangements, the planned and finally realised survey of actors was seen as crucial.

## **2.2. The views on local state-society relations from the perspective of the actors involved. Results of the survey**

The second book, presents (as mentioned at the beginning of this article) results of the survey. It consists of two parts: in one «General Insights on Local State-Society Relations» are presented and in the other «Network-specific Insights on Local State-Society Relations» [in addition, there are a short introduction on «The book’s scope and content» (EGNER *et al.*, 2022b) and annexes on «How was the survey conducted in the individual countries?» and data about the survey].

The first part starts with a chapter by TELES (2022) with the telling title «Devil in details». He demonstrates not only that typologies commonly used to classify local state-society relations as well as local government systems do not match with the perceptions of actors about the autonomy, coherence and relevance of the governance arrangements they are involved in. However, what he also shows is even more interesting - namely that the perceptions of actors about these characteristics of local state-society relations also deviate (at least partly) from the classification presented by the authors of the country chapters in the first book (TELES *et al.*, 2021a). These findings lead TELES to the following conclusion:

«Only by focusing on specific networks and their members' shared meanings about these governance arrangements, we would be able to better understand their functioning. To additionally look for the members' perceptions of autonomy, coherence and relevance would allow to explore differences between specific groups of actors, within similar networks, and —conceivably— between the experts' assessment and the actors' perceptions. All those expected differences would allow a more detailed understanding of local state-society networks in Europe and to explore possible patterns which may have been neglected through more traditional institutionalist approaches» (TELES, 2022: 26).

TELES' search for patterns in respondents' perceptions by country (2022: 28-34), types of networks (2022: 34-37) and policy areas (2022: 37-40) did also not yield clear findings, and he concluded:

«What the field lacks and has yet to deliver, will only result from comparisons of local government systems that require substantially greater contextual knowledge, new ways of assessing the multiplicity and complexity of governance arrangements and better understanding of the local actors' shared meanings.

The “devil in the detail” can only be made visible by focusing on specific networks and the perception of their functioning by their members» (TELES, 2022: 42).

Other chapters in the first part of the book, based on the results of the survey, deal with issues that are critically discussed in the debate on governance, for example, the notion of democracy not only conceptually linkable to such arrangements but also of the actors involved in them, the legitimacy claims of these actors, the perception of the achieved kind of legitimacy and the role of elected local politicians in local state-society relations.

HEINELT and EGNER (2022) start their contribution with the title «The notion of democracy among actors involved in locals state-society relations» with the obvious observation that decision making in the various forms of local state-society relations is taking place beyond the municipal council as the core body of representative democracy at the local level. Having said that, the authors of this chapter refer to results of previous surveys in which it was empirically shown that even mayors and councillors do not clearly support a notion of democracy in line with representative democracy emphasising the significance of electoral legitimacy and decision-making competencies of elected representative bodies. Instead, mayors and councillors follow clearly different notions of democracy which correspond to the distinction between a «thin» liberal (or representative) democracy (as BARBER, 1984 called it) and a (broader) participatory understand-

ing of democracy (see VETTER *et al.*, 2018). Referring to this distinction, HEINELT and EGNER addresses the following questions: (a) Can different notions of democracy be found among actors involved in local state-society relations? (b) If different notions of democracy can be found among the surveyed actors, how to explain them? Their empirical findings are summarised by them as follows:

«Firstly, a clear distinction can be seen of the respondents' notion of democracy in line with the conceptually distinguishable models of participatory and representative democracy. Secondly, the support of one of these models can neither be explained by the role performed by the actors - namely as representatives of (certain) societal actors or of the municipalities and whether the latter were elected politicians or civil servants (*i. e.* their institutional background) nor can it be attributed to the function (*i. e.* only consultation or partnership or even delegated power) of the considered institutionalized collaboration between municipal and societal actors in which the respondents were involved. Instead, general political attitudes (self-placement on a right-left scale) and socio-structural characteristics (age and gender) of the respondents that correlate with political attitudes have an impact on whether one of these models of democracy is supported or rejected» (HEINELT and EGNER, 2022: 59).

FOSSEIM and VOLLAARD (2022) tackle in their chapter on «The democratic quality of non-electoral representation through local state-society relations» whether local democracy can be strengthened by local state-society relations although societal actors cannot rely on general elections for the authorisation of their representative function in these institutionalised political arrangements. By referring to the debate about *representative claim*, triggered by SAWARD (2006; 2010; for an overview about this debate see GUASTI and GEISSEL, 2019; 2021), the authors are stressing that non-elected just like elected «individuals and organizations [are] claiming to act on behalf of a cause or a particular group of people» (FOSSEIM and VOLLAARD, 2022: 64). What is crucial for non-elected and elected representatives (from the perspective of this debate) are the authorization of representative claim as well as accountability mechanisms linking non-elected and elected representatives with a particular constituency. Because non-elected representatives cannot refer to elections, FOSSEIM and VOLLAARD were looking for authorization and accountability mechanisms used by the surveyed non-electoral actors involved in local state-society relations to underpin their representative claim. The authors summarised the result of their analysis by stating:

«The findings offer hopeful signs of non-electoral representation being a useful democratic innovation, as (i) a large share of non-elected representatives across Europe feel that the represented agree or support their contributions within the networks, (ii) most of the representatives inform the represented, allowing the latter to authorize the representatives and hold them accountable, and (iii) a large majority feel that they are obliged to give accounts of their actions» (FOSSEIM and VOLLAARD, 2022: 80-81).

And finally, they added: «A key underlying mechanism seems to be that the more claim makers are in a situation in which they feel the need to legitimize their claims, the more they do so» (FOSSEIM and VOLLAARD, 2022: 81).



EGNER and HEINELT take up the issue of representative claim as well in their chapter on «Legitimacy claims of societal actors involved in local state-society relations». However, they depart from the simple question of why particular actors should be involved or are allowed in participating in governance arrangements and SCHMITTER's answer to it. SCHMITTER (2002: 62) argued that «persons/organizations [...] could potentially be invited or allowed to participate [because] they possess some quality or resource that entitles them to participate.» And these «quality or resource that entitles them to participate» depend on «the substance of the problem that has to be solved or the conflict that has to be resolved» (SCHMITTER, 2002: 63). Based on these ideas, SCHMITTER distinguishes different «holder types» - namely (a) actors having «[r]ights that are attached to membership in a national political community and that presumably entitle all those having them to participate equally in all decisions made by that community [; these] holders are usually called citizens» (SCHMITTER, 2002: 62); (b) «spatial holders», (c) shareholders, that is to say, owners; (d) «stake holders», or those who «—regardless of where they live, what their nationality is or what their level of information/skills may be— [...] could be materially or even spiritually affected by a given measure» (SCHMITTER, 2002: 63); (e) «interest holders», specifically someone who «demonstrates sufficient awareness of the issue being decided and makes known the desire to participate in the name of some constituency» (SCHMITTER, 2002: 63), for example «(voluntary) spokespersons» or the interested public; (f) «knowledge holders» as varying kinds of experts having specific knowledge (or skills) which are «presumably needed if the policies taken are going to be technically effective» (SCHMITTER, 2002: 62); and finally (g) «status holders», that is, actors (according to SCHMITTER, usually organisations) «that have been recognized by the authorities ultimately responsible for decision and formally accorded the right to represent a designated social, economic or political category» (SCHMITTER, 2002: 63). These different «holders» were operationalised by particular given answers to a question of the questionnaire used in the survey. Based on the responses EGNER and HEINELT addressed the questions (a) how societal actors justify their involvement in local state-society relations, and (b) if there are differences among the various forms of local state-society relations characterised by the function they are performing and the kind of societal actors. The authors found clear patterns. The first one is the following:

«Societal actors refer, in their representative claims, to three independent dimensions of legitimacy, namely to (a) their “specific knowledge required for the effectiveness of decisions taken or suggestions made by the network” and their “awareness about the issue at stake in the network”, (b) the representation of “the residents living in the territorial” boundaries of the network and therefore “those who are affected by measures of the network”, and (c) representation of those who “contribute financially to the activities of the network” and “can carry out suggestions or decisions from [the respective] network” (EGNER and HEINELT, 2022: 96).

The second one is related to the form of participation (distinguished by ARNSTEIN, 1969) which characterises a governance arrangement:

«Societal actors participating in networks marked by *consultation* [...] based their claims to representation more strongly on the statements that they are affected or represent those who are affected by measures of the network they are involved in and that they are speaking on behalf of those who reside within the territorial jurisdiction of the network in question. Societal actors participating in local state-society relations characterized by *delegated power* justified their involvement by citing their knowledge and awareness as well as their financial contributions to the activities of the network and their role in the implementation of these activities. Finally, societal actors participating in the *partnership* form of local state-society relations referred in their claims mainly to their knowledge and awareness of the issue at stake» (EGNER and HEINELT, 2022: 97).

The authors end their chapter with a statement that should generally be considered seriously when analysing responses obtained from surveys:

«It should [...] be borne in mind that social science concepts are sometimes insufficient to capture the actors' understanding of the issue in question, as social science concepts lay out theoretical distinctions between dimensions that cannot be adequately demonstrated by looking at statements of actors - at least as far as legitimacy claims are concerned» (EGNER and HEINELT, 2022: 97).

Referring for instance to EASTON (1965) and his conception of political systems inspired by early ideas of system theory SCHARPF (1970) distinguished between two forms of legitimacy - namely one deriving from opportunities of giving input (articulation of support and demands by the people) into the political system, *i. e. input legitimacy*, and another based on output of the political systems meeting the expectation of people, *i. e. output legitimacy*. Later on, SCHARPF applied this approach to the European Union (SCHARPF, 1999; 2009). Others (ZÜRN, 2000; HAUS and HEINELT, 2005; HEINELT, 2010; and in particular SCHMIDT, 2013; SCHMIDT and WOOD, 2019) focused on the processes within the political system [perceived by EASTON (1965) as a black box] through which inputs are transformed into outputs, and looked for how to create by transparency and accountability of these processes *throughput legitimacy* (for a critique of this approach see STEFFEK, 2019). Carmen NAVARRO, Carles PAMIES and Lluís MEDIR consider in their contribution on «Throughput legitimacy in European local state-society networks» the involvement of societal actors in governance arrangements as crucial for achieving throughput legitimacy of local state-society networks and by this for their legitimacy in general. Drawing on results of the survey they assess the extent to which —from the perspective of the respondents— transparency and accountability are met in local state-society networks as standards of throughput legitimacy. Furthermore, the authors try to identify factors that can explain different degrees to which transparency and accountability vary. The authors summarised their findings that they:

«Point to an overall positive evaluation of throughput legitimacy in local state-society networks. [...] They confirm the existence of high levels of accountability of network members, transparency of processes, inclusiveness of governance procedures and relatively high levels of efficacy of decision-making dynamics as well» (NAVARRO *et al.*, 2022: 177). And they concluded: «The throughput component of legitimacy stands out as a characteristic feature of governance arrangements. [...] Therefore, European local state-society

networks seem to be playing their role in meeting legitimate decision-making demands from a throughput perspective and advancing the democratic goals they were designed for» (NAVARRO *et al.*, 2022: 178).

However, their attempts to identify structural factors —namely policy sectors, network types or groups of countries— that contribute to or hinder high levels of throughput legitimacy did not lead to clear results (see NAVARRO *et al.*, 2022: 173-177).

In the debate on governance, it is emphasised that elected politicians can play a crucial role in arrangements as metagovernors (KLIJN and KOPPEJAN, 2000; SÖRENSEN, 2006; SÖRENSEN and TORFING, 2009; GJALTEMA *et al.*, 2020). As metagovernors, elected politicians should be able to steer processes in governance network by, for example, fostering cooperation among actors, building trust among them, enhancing democratic deliberation, highlighting and protecting common interests, pushing back interest-driven narrow agendas in favour of more open ones, and ensuring self-evaluation of network activities to learn from failures. The chapter entitled «Does metagovernance matter? The patterns and effects of local politicians' participation in local state-society relations», written by Tom VERHELST and Koenraad DE CEUNINCK, examines whether, from the perspective of the network participants surveyed (*i. e.* actors from society and administrative staff but also politicians themselves), local politicians in local state-society relations perform this role. The article also addresses the question of whether there are differences in the assessment of this role played by local politicians and how these differences can be explained. Based on impressing operationalization of what metagovernance mean and of network performance (VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 120-125) as well as a sophisticated statistical analysis (VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 127-134), the authors concluded:

«Network members of European local state-society relations [...] rate metagovernance exercised by first-tier [*i. e.* municipal] and second-tier [provincial, county etc.] politicians in a moderately positive fashion [...]. Generally, councilors seem more preoccupied with the major guiding principles of effective and democratic network governance (cooperation, trust, ownership, common interest, democratic deliberation) than with the more operational, managerial tasks (quick wins, success and failure, agendas, self-assessment)» (VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 135).

Although the authors emphasised that «[t]hese role orientations displayed some country variation» (*ibid.*), these differences do not match with any of the widely used typologies of local government system (HEINELT *et al.*, 2018). Nevertheless, the authors were convinced to be able to note that in:

«Southern Europe [...] local politicians seem most active as metagovernor. [...] Finally, as could be expected from local elitist infrastructures [as one type of “national infrastructures” for local governance arrangements distinguished by SELLERS *et al.*, 2020; the author], local politicians assume a more proactive role in such systems» (VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 131).

Furthermore, the authors found out that the type of local politician involved matters «as the inclusion of mayors and second-tier executives coincided with higher meta-

governance scores in the networks» (VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 135). Finally, they concluded that «metagovernance is connected to the network's relevance and policy type» (*ibid.*), because

«[m]embers from networks dealing with economic services experience less metagovernance from local politicians involved. In networks with social objectives, the overall metagovernance performance of the local political elite is evaluated in a slightly more positive way» (VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 131).

Finally, it should be emphasised that the authors were able to demonstrate (cfr. VERHELST and DE CEUNINCK, 2011: 131 ff.) that, from the respondents' perspective, metagovernance increases not only the effectiveness but also the legitimacy of the governance networks in which they participate.

Other contributions to the first part of the book, which cannot be considered here due to the given length of this article, are those by Carmen WALENTA-BERGMANN on «Ideology, trust and autonomy: Differences between elected politicians and all other participants of local state-society networks», by Patrícia SILVA, Luís MOTA and Filipe TELES on «The unbearable lightness of coherence within local governance arrangements», and by Marcello CABRIA and Annick MAGNIER on «Collaborative governance and the rescaling of local state-society networks».

The same unfortunately applies to some chapters of the secondly part of the book, where network-specific insights on local state-society relations are presented - namely for the chapter on these networks in Central and Eastern Europe by Jurga Bučaitė-Vilkė, Jakub Lysek and Aistė Lazauskien, on advisory councils in general by Iveta Reinholde, Malvīne Stučka and Inese Āboliņa, youth committees by Linnéa Henriksson and Janette Huttunen, councils of older people and persons with disabilities by David Feltenius and Linnéa Henriksson, and school advisory boards by Eva Marín Hlynsdóttir and Grétar Þór Eypórssón.

However, two chapters on such issue-specific networks of local state-society relations will be considered in the following for different reasons.

This applies first of all to networks of local economic development which are seen as crucial for urban regimes focused on economic growth (see, for example, STONE, 1989) or «The city as a growth machine» (MOLOTCH, 1976). Detlef SACK looked at such European local state-society relations in which representatives of business interests, but also others, are involved, not at least representatives of trade unions. He starts his contribution with the title «Organized business and trade unions in local governance» which degree of influence the surveyed participants in local state-society relations focused in local economic development are attributing why to local business. In a next step SACK considered how representatives of local business and unions perceive their influence in these network. SACK shows in his analysis that the overall influence of local business in the considered European governance arrangements has been assessed by their members as rather moderate. Furthermore, the perception of business influence is mainly determined by the respondents' individual socio-political attitudes [such as the

support of the notions of democracy pointed out in the chapter by HEINELT and EGNER (see above), the capability to trust, or the self-placement on the left-right political spectrum] and social status derived from education. «Regarding the views of representatives of local business and trade unions» the author concluded that their «attribution of influence to the local state-society networks and the benefits from participation for the own organization and group derive from the network's traits, functions and experiences, as well as the own role» (SACK, 2022: 297). However, «both groups show a similar ambivalent take of local government and its involvement in local state-society networks. While these should be autonomous from local authorities, local government is also required to coordinate and support inter-sectoral collaborations» (SACK, 2022: 297). A further interesting finding of SACK's analysis is that the responses of representatives of local business and trade unions

«vary both regarding the group they represent and the density of coupling with the organization and group they come from. While representatives of local business have specific knowledge resources at their disposal, union members feel not only a responsibility for the residents but experience a much more immediate relation of representation. They appear to be held notably more accountable by their membership than representatives of local business» (SACK, 2022: 297).

Local Action Groups (LAGs) are an interesting case of institutionalised interaction between the local state and society across the EU. Rather, it is also interesting that they differ clearly between individual countries in terms of their autonomy, coherence and relevance (so at least the finding presented by HEINELT *et al.*, 2021: 390-398) - and this despite the fact that these governance arrangements have been set up according to EU-wide specifications in terms of their structure and functioning (see LYSEK *et al.*, 2022: 301-305). HEINELT *et al.* (2021: 400-408) argued the differences detected particularly in respect to the autonomy, coherence and relevance of LAGs indicate a general feature that have to be considered in the analysis of institutionalised governance arrangements - namely that actors (local as well as at upper level of government) play a crucial role in creating and, even more importantly, interpreting particular institutional rules and making use of them in line with their interpretations of the opportunities and constraints that are derived from institutional settings.

«This means that institutional opportunities and constraints should not be seen as factually given contextual conditions. Instead, it must be emphasized that actors who must act under such circumstances have to interpret them, *i. e.* have to give meaning to context. In this context, actors are also regarded as possessing “[foreground] discursive abilities” (SCHMIDT, 2010: 4) - namely the ability to enforce ideas through discourse and thereby to be able to perpetuate or change institutions. In this view, institutions (which also include institutionalized local state-society relations) are simultaneously, on the one hand, structures following external rules and, on the other, constructs internal to the agents involved (SCHMIDT, 2008)» (HEINELT *et al.*, 2021b: 407).

This is a point of view (as admitted by HEINELT *et al.*, 2021b: 407) inspired by the discursive institutionalism which emphasised

«that ideas give meaning to actors' experience of the world (WENDT, 1999), enable actors to handle informational complexity or even situations of outright uncertainty by offering interpretations of what is wrong and how to move forward (BLYTH, 2002), as well as inspire discourses that may justify policy programmes in both cognitive and normative terms (SCHMIDT, 2002)» (CARSTENSEN and SCHMIDT, 2016: 322).

However, it should be recalled that the differences found in LAGs with regard to their autonomy, coherence and relevance and, in connection with this, also the assignment to different types of local state-society relations (according to the typology of TELES, 2018) are based on the country chapters written by country experts in the book edited by TELES *et al.* (2021a). But what about the assessment of LAGs and the perception of their functioning (not at least regarding the role of civil society) by actors who are members of these local governance arrangements? This is the question addressed in the contribution by Jakub LYSEK, Joanna KRUKOWSKA, Carmen NAVARRO, Alistair JONES and Colin COPUS under the title «Alike in diversity? Local Action Groups in nine European countries». After outlining countries' variation of LAGs in Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, England, Finland, Poland, Spain and Sweden on institutional arrangements and dynamics, the authors focused their analysis on «the perceptions of LAGs' members regarding the autonomy, coherence and relevance of LAGs in relation to local policy making» (LYSEK *et al.*, 2022: 304). In their conclusion the authors emphasised some findings that support on the basis of the responses of actors involved on LAGs in more details what was already highlighted by HEINELT *et al.* (2021). A first one is that while

«the LEADER program [the basic EU instrument for establishing LAGs; the author] gives a broad overview as to how LAGs should be structured, there is clear room for LAGs to be developed to fit local or regional needs and demands. A clear example of this is how LAGs should focus on boosting rural development, but some countries have urban LAGs» (LYSEK *et al.*, 2022: 314).

LYSEK *et al.* (2022: 314) also found out that for «the most part, the findings in our survey reinforce that expert opinion», *i. e.* presented in the country chapters in TELES *et al.* (2021). A further finding is that in

«terms of autonomy, LAGs were able to operate separately to municipalities, although there were clear linkages in developing regional rural development plans. LAGs, however, have access to funds independent of the municipalities - specifically via [the EU] EAFRD funding and the LEADER program. Within the broad autonomy, there may be national rules that impose some restrictions on the operations of LAGs e.g. specific membership requirements. The reality is, however, that LAGs have a high degree of autonomy to act as they see fit» (LYSEK *et al.*, 2022: 314-314).

And it is precisely with regard to the perception of influence that the authors noted as a central finding:

«It is in the relevance of the network that the greatest variation in response was found. There were differences from specific actors rather than from different countries - although on a country-by-country basis there was a wide range of responses when examining, for

example, the influence wielded by LAGs. In terms of the actors, local politicians assessed the relevance of the network to be much higher than other respondents. Interestingly, the most skeptical respondents were the administrative staff» (LYSEK *et al.*, 2022: 314).

### 3. CONCLUSION: SURVEYS AS A USEFUL INSTRUMENT FOR ACTOR-CENTRED APPROACHES IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT STUDIES AND URBAN RESEARCH

HEINELT and MAGNIER summarised the findings presented by numerous publications of the European network of researchers which has been conducting surveys among local political actors for more than 20 years in their review article appropriately under the titled «Analyzing governance through local leaders' perceptions». It was truly the intention of this group of scholars to know —for instance— how local political actors understand their role, what they are thinking about ideas for reform (if not fashions for reform) —such as New Public Management or the direct elections of mayors—.

Analysing governance through the actors' perceptions was precisely also the central objective of the survey of actors involved in local state-society relations on which the presented second book is based. As mentioned before as examples, it was a question of what idea these actors have of how democracy should work, why they think they should be involved in the governance arrangements in question, *i. e.* what representative claims they put forward, what dimensions of legitimacy they consider to be given for the respective local state-society relations and what role they ascribe to elected local politicians. Beyond that, however, a key question was how the actors surveyed assess the autonomy, coherence and relevance of the respective institutionalised governance network in which they participate. And with regard to this question, TELES (2022) showed that the answers do not correspond to common explanatory approaches related to institutional structures and typologies based on them. Also, when trying to answer the questions mentioned just above, these explanations could not consistently offer clear answers. The conclusion drawn not only from these findings but already from the comparison of the country chapters on local state-society relations in the first book has been that actors matter: They are able to interpret the opportunities and constraints arising from the local context in general and the institutional setting in particular in which they have to interact, and they can make choices accordingly. In short, actors are not behaving like puppets on a string. At the same time, actors would behave like Don Quijote if they ignored the constraints set by the local context —including institutional settings—.

Today, hardly anyone believes that the actions of actors can be unequivocally and clearly determined by institutions. The different varieties of neo-institutionalism (cfr. HALL and TAYLOR, 1996; SCHMIDT, 2010) have likewise taught us that institutions only have an effect on the actions of actors if and insofar as their «organisational field» fits a corresponding «meaning system» (to use the wording of SCOTT, 1994). But who or what is playing the decisive role - actors or structures/institutions? In other words: which

approach of the neo-institutionalism fits to solve the puzzle? For most of the authors who deal with this question in the two books presented, actors play the decisive role, *i. e.* they follow an actor-centred neo-institutionalism. But even though actors are seen as having the opportunity to make political choices, these authors do not advocate rational choice institutionalism. Instead, they are in favour of the discursive institutionalism (as already made clear above) because they start from the assumption that humans are social beings. As social beings, humans are not simply interacting with each other, but they are able «to create a public language that will help reformulate private interests in terms susceptible to public accommodation» (BARBER, 1984: 119). Thereby, *i. e.* by discourses, they are agreeing or disagreeing on what is desirable and on certain interpretations of what is under particular conditions also feasible. From this perspective, discursive struggles over the validity and dominance of such interpretations (or «struggles over ideas»; STONE, 2002) shape the attitudes, behaviour and ultimately the political choices of actors - rather than (as assumed by rational choice institutionalisms) given preferences of humans who are seen as «material beings in all they are and in all they do» (BARBER, 1984: 32) and whose «nature is founded on a radical premise no less startling for its familiarity: man is alone» (BARBER, 1984: 68).

From this point of view, the analysis of «governance through local leaders' perceptions» does not aim at identifying (presumed) given preferences of actors through surveys, which can finally be summed up to independent variables. Instead, it is a matter of identifying attitudes or beliefs of actors through surveys, which have emerged as a collective phenomenon from discursive processes and can explain behaviour and ultimately political choices.

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