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Co-creating Europe-related activities. The role of German local governments in bottom-up mobilisation

Abstract

In the process of Europeanisation, the local level takes an intermediary position between citizens and the European level. A special feature of local authorities' European involvement is that many local Europe-related activities are developed and implemented not only for citizens, but to a considerable extent by them or in cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal actors. The paper presents fresh data from a research project focusing on the German case to examine the local level's role in the European multi-level-governance system. We ask in this paper: How do civil society actors and municipalities interact in organising Europe-related bottom-up activities and what are the driving motives and ideas for these activities? In a first step, we investigate the variety of bottom-up mobilisation found at the local level and the role of local actors – city administrations, civil society associations and others – in creating opportunities for citizen engagement. In a second step, we trace forms of co-creation, i.e. local civil society involvement in municipal European policy-making, across the four dimensions of Europeanization. Third, we typologize the different local networks based on the type of underlying relation. In summary, Europe-related bottom-up mobilisation takes place through different citizen-oriented activities, often organised and implemented in local networks. The motives for this engagement are mainly based on a normative understanding of Europe as an idea, encompassing notions of European identity and society.

Keywords: European Integration, Europeanisation, local level, local actors

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1. Introduction

In the process of Europeanisation, the local level takes an intermediary position between citizens and the European level. Cities and municipalities themselves often engage with Europe in various ways (Gröbe et al., 2023; Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021; Dossi, 2017). These include the use of European funding (Verhelst, 2017) and the implementation of European law at the municipal level (Barbehön, 2016; Paasch, 2022), advocacy for local interests in the European multi-level system (Callanan & Tatham, 2014; Heinelt, 2017), cooperation with other European cities and municipalities (Falkenhain et al., 2012; Jańczak, 2017), and Europe-related activities for citizens in their own municipality.

While local level Europeanization has been researched well (for a comprehensive overview see Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021), the focus often lies on local administrations alone. Co-creation, while researched for local government processes and local public service production in general (Teles et al., 2021) or in specific policy fields like sustainability policy (Ansell et al., 2022), has been focused on less when it comes to a cross-cutting theme like Europeanization. Focussing on Europeanisation as the outcome of a particular type of European-wide edge-crossing public policy-making initiated in or by municipalities and that benefits the local population in manifold ways (e.g. via the creation of access to new financial resources for the local community), we argue in favour of broadening the perspective on Europeanisation by including local networks and how they provide a framework for the co-creation of Europe-related activities. Co-creation refers to the inclusion of non-governmental actors – be they individual citizens or associations – in governance. It can be "defined as the collaborative effort of distributed actors to enhance public value production through creative problem solving" (Røiseland et al., 2024). While co-creation can refer to a wide array of (local) actors, we specifically focus on the cooperation between citizens/associations and local administrations in pursuing Europe-related activities.

A special feature of local authorities' European involvement is that many local Europe-related activities are developed and implemented not only for citizens, but to a considerable extent by them or in cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal actors. Local Europe-related bottom-up activities can be initiated by citizens or civil society groups and then taken up and supported by

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municipal actors or, conversely, they can be conceived by municipal actors and then implemented together with or by civil society groups. Hence, local Europe-related governance structures are not characterised by the coexistence, but rather by the close link between the European engagement of citizens and civil society organisations on the one hand and the European activities of local authorities on the other.

This also has a normative dimension. Both in academic and political-practical discourse, as the political level closest to citizens, cities and municipalities are seen as an important source of input and output legitimacy for the EU (Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021). The EU itself also directly addresses civil society, for example in the framework of the "Citizens for Europe" programme (Kapustāns, 2022), expecting impulses to strengthen bottom-up political cohesion and the broad recognition of democratic values in Europe precisely from the local level and the interaction between municipalities and civil society (European Commission, 2008). Funding schemes like LEADER for rural areas require the inclusion of civil society in the so called "Local Action Groups", i.e. public-privately mixed local organising committees.

Given both the practical and (assumed) normative potential of co-creation, we ask: How do citizens and civil society actors interact with municipalities in organising Europe-related bottom-up activities? To study this interaction, we examine the Europe-related activities and organisational structures in German cities and municipalities. This allows us to gain a better understanding of Europe-related co-creation and the role of local actors in mediating citizens' or citizen groups' bottom-up activities and engagement with the EU. For this purpose, we draw on two sets of original data. First, we use data from a new survey among German cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants on their Europe-related engagement (Gröbe et al., 2022). Second, we draw on the findings from case studies on Europe-related activities of municipal and civil society actors in eight selected German cities. Our analysis contributes to the scholarly debate on and the empirical study of local-level Europeanisation in the following ways. First, instead of limiting the Europeanisation of the local level only to city administrations, we look at the role of local-level networks in Europe-related activities. We argue that only the embeddedness in vivid local networks enables local governments to pursuit successful European activities. Second, we inductively shed light on the motives for the Europe-related bottom-up activities of local actors. These are manyfold and shape the key areas of action. In this way, thirdly, our article contributes to the discussion and future research on the impact of local action on political cohesion in Europe, also beyond the reach of our empirical case, Germany. A look beyond the core institutions of local government is necessary to understand variation in bottom-up Europeanization.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we present the state of research on the topic and our framework for conceptualising the role of cities and municipalities as European intermediaries vis-à-vis European institutions on

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the one hand and Europe's citizens on the other. In section three we explain the methodology of the empirical study underlying this article. Then, in section four, we present the empirical results: Based on our survey, we reconstruct how local administrations create opportunity structures for co-creation through their own activities, and what resources they have to do so. Then, we identify forms of co-creation drawing on our qualitative case studies and typologize the networks and their underlying logics of interaction. Finally, in section five, we draw conclusions regarding the role of cities and municipalities in Europe-related bottom-up mobilisation.

2. State of research: Local level Europeanization and the role of networks

The concept and theory of Europeanisation is an important first point of reference for the analysis of the role of cities and municipalities vis-à-vis the European institutions on the one hand and the European citizens on the other. In general, the term Europeanisation "refers to interactions between the European Union, its member states or third countries" (Börzel & Panke 2019, 122). However, the concept of Europeanisation can cover different aspects and phenomena related to European integration (Olsen, 2002). Accordingly, several different definitions have developed in the academic literature, of which those by Ladrech (1994), Risse et al. (2001), Radaelli (2003), and Vink and Graziano (2008) are among the most prominent. For the purpose of this article, we refer to the definition of Hamedinger and Wolffhardt (2010, 28), who define Europeanisation "as the interplay between actors and institutions on the European and the city level, which leads to changes in local politics, policies, institutional arrangements, discourse, actors' preferences, values, norms and belief systems on both levels". This definition of Europeanisation has three advantages. Firstly, in contrast to the more general definitions, this definition explicitly refers to the local level. Secondly, this definition explicitly includes local actors in addition to local administrations. Thus, it is open for analysing the integration of citizens and civil society organisations in the process of Europeanisation. Thirdly, the cognitive dimension of Europeanisation is captured, which is particularly important for the analysis of the underlying motives for European-related activities of local actors.

The literature on local level Europeanization distinguishes between a horizontal and a vertical axis of Europeanisation (Rooij, 2002; Marshall, 2005; Kern & Bulkeley 2009; Hamedinger & Wolffhardt, 2010; Bever et al., 2011a; Guderjan, 2015; Guderjan & Miles 2016; Guderjan & Verhelst 2021). On the vertical axis, cities and municipalities act directly or indirectly with the European level, along the horizontal axis they act in cross-border cooperation and in networks with other cities as well as towards and with their own citizens. Based on this distinction, we can analytically divide local activities into four dimensions (Gröbe et al., 2023).

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While the first two dimensions, *downloading* and *uploading*, are oriented along the vertical axis, the other two dimensions, *horizontal networking* and *communication*, are aligned along the horizontal axis. *Downloading* includes both the implementation of European law and the use of EU funding. *Uploading* refers to the processes of formulating and representing interests on the European level.

In this study, a particular emphasis lies on the two horizontal dimensions, *horizontal networking* and *communication*, since activities in both dimensions involve local government actors interacting with citizens and civil society actors. *Horizontal networking* relates to the various forms of cooperation between municipalities in national and transnational networks (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Zerbinati & Massey, 2008; Zerbinati, 2004; Huggins, 2018) as well as in the context of town twinning (Falkenhain et al., 2012; Jańczak, 2017; Joenniemi & Jańczak, 2017; Kajta & Opiłowska, 2022) or cross-border projects (Bever et al., 2011b; Crossey & Weber, 2024; Svensson, 2015) aiming to collect information, develop and implement policies or exchange information and best practices (Frątczak-Müller & Mielczarek-Żejmo, 2020; Marshall, 2005). In this dimension, citizens and civil society actors are particularly involved in organising and shaping European activities by participating in their city's town-twinning activities, for example in the context of twinning associations, as participants in youth and citizen exchanges and cross-border projects. Here, we can also draw on sociological concepts of horizontal Europeanization that focus on processes of socialization in Europe (Heidenreich, 2019; Mau, 2015; Mau & Verwiebe, 2010). This perspective stresses the importance of concrete interactions and experiences. *Communication* is also located on the horizontal axis, but refers to the relationship between local government and the local population concerning European issues and activities. It includes the integration and mobilisation of citizens, civil society and political actors by the local government in European issues. Typical Europe-related activities in this dimension, developed both for and in cooperation with citizens and civil society actors, include providing information on European issues, establishing and supporting European exchanges by schools, associations and citizens and organising events on European topics. Local activities of this type are mainly driven by cognitive frames like norms and values of local actors towards the European project (Reiter et al., 2024) and local discursive practices (Barbehön, 2016). With the dimension *communication* we capture the role of the local government vis-à-vis its citizenry, civil society and local political actors in European issues. These aspects have received little attention in previous research, even though the Europeanisation of the local level as well takes place through the European bottom-up engagement of a municipality's citizens.

In order to understand the conditions for co-creation, we need to discuss both the constitutional framework and resources for EU-related activities. In Germany, like other EU member states, Europe-related policies are not among the mandatory tasks of municipalities. In Germany, there are different types of municipal tasks as defined in the municipal laws of the Länder. Obligatory tasks (like waste-disposal,

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school-maintenance, or social assistance) have to be fulfilled by the municipalities, while they can choose whether and how to pursue voluntary tasks (like funding of culture, European policy). As a voluntary task, cities can decide whether and how to conduct their Europe-related activities, how to organise them and what priorities to set. Although the integration of the local level into the European multi-level system is not linked to a specific model of institutionalisation (Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021, 75), similar organisational structures and procedures have become established within local governments in both Germany and other EU member states (Benington & Harvey, 1999; Marshall, 2005; Münch, 2006; Bacon, 2016; Verhelst, 2017; Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021). In the literature, the establishment of a (central) unit for EU affairs within the administration of local authorities, often in combination with the appointment of a municipal EU representative, is seen as an important step towards institutionalising European action (Münch, 2006, 181–189; Bacon, 2016, 113–118; Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021, 75; John, 2000, 884). By establishing their own EU organisational unit, municipalities not only emphasise the importance of Europe (Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021, 75), but also provide the organisational conditions for bundling the cross-cutting task of "Europe" and performing it effectively (Klausen & Goldsmith, 1997, 241; Münch, 2006, 178; Bacon, 2016, 114; Guderjan & Verhelst 2021, 75). In addition to the establishment of a (central) office for EU affairs within the administration of local authorities, these include in particular the diverse activities for networking with other actors, be it at national and European level (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Verhelst, 2017) or with civil society actors within the local authority itself.

For considering the interaction and linkages between local governments, civil society, associations and individual actors within the framework of a European-related network, we take up the ideas of policy networks (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Teles et al., 2021). Knoke has distinguished five basic types of relations amongst organisational or (we could add with regard to the local level) individual actors as structural basis of networks: resource exchange, information transmission, power relations, boundary penetration and sentimental attachments (Knoke, 2011, 211). Notably resource exchange which relates to the bundling of local state- and societal resources for accomplishing a common purpose, boundary penetration, referring to the mutual coordination of action for the achievement of a common goal, and sentimental attachments in the sense of reciprocal "emotional affiliations" as a basis for mutual support and common solidaristic action (Knoke, 2011, 211) seem particularly important to understand local networks' role in pursuing Europe-related action and in framing Europe. Drawing on Knoke's distinction, we can typologize the empirical manifestations of Europe-related networks. We can expect that co-creation in relation to European activities will be more prevalent the fewer resources (financial/material; knowledge) local government has available for the voluntary implementation of European policy. We can also expect citizens to be more involved in the co-creation of municipal European policy the more traditional

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or long-standing joint municipal-citizen relations are in the field of municipal European activities (e.g. town twinning). Furthermore, we can expect co-creation to be more intensive the more intensive the local government-citizen networking and the more active the local urban society is.

3. Methods

To examine the role of the municipal level in European bottom-up mobilisation, the paper proceeds in two steps. As a first step, we look at the nature and frequency of the various European activities that either address local people or are organised in cooperation with them. Furthermore, we examine the organisational resources that municipalities can use for this purpose. In a second step, we investigate the ideas driving the Europe-related bottom activities of these local actors. Empirically, we draw on two types of original data on German municipalities. First, we use the findings of an online survey conducted among all German cities with 20.000 or more inhabitants (n=700) (reference date: 31.12.2019) in the period 1.11.2021 – 16.1.2022. The survey was sent both by post and by e-mail to the cities' and municipalities' mayors, requesting them to forward the questionnaire to the employees responsible for European affairs. The questionnaire used for the online-based survey was developed considering the relevant research literature and consisted of both closed and open-ended questions asking about various aspects related to municipal European affairs, including the status of Europe, organisational structures, objectives, and activities of municipal European affairs. A total of 307 out of 700 cities and municipalities took part in the survey (response rate: 43.9 per cent).

Table 1: Cases and interviewees

Case City	Size	Economic situation	Interviewees
A-City	Small	Above average	■ Mayor ■ City Administration Department (Culture) ■ Economic development ■ Civil society, association ■ School
B-City	Small	Below average	■ Mayor ■ City administration, town twinning ■ Economic development ■ School

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Case City	Size	Economic situation	Interviewees
C-City	Medium	Below average	■ City administration, town twinning ■ City Administration Department (Culture) ■ Chamber of Industry and Commerce ■ Chamber of Crafts ■ Organization: Theatre (Culture) ■ Association (town twinning)
D-City	Medium	Above average	■ City administration, European representative + town twinning ■ City Administration Department (Building, Urban Development) ■ Economic development ■ Civil society, association 1 ■ Civil society, association 2 ■ School
E-City	Medium	Below average	■ City Administration European Affairs Officer + Europe Direct ■ Civil society, association 1 (town twinning) ■ Civil society, association 2 ■ School ■ Youth parliament (participatory body)
F-City	Medium	Above average	■ Mayor ■ Department (Economic Development) + Europe Direct ■ School ■ Civil society, association 1 ■ Civil society, association 2
G-City	Small	Below Average	■ Mayor ■ City Administration Department (Building and Economic Administration)
H-City	Small	Above average	■ Mayor ■ City administration, town twinning ■ Civil society, association (town twinning) ■ Europe Direct

Small: 20.000 – 50.000 inhabitants, medium: ~100.000 inhabitants or more; economic situation measured by tax revenue compared to *Land* average.

Second, the quantitative data is complemented with interviews from eight German case studies. In order to enable a comparison by keeping the framework (e.g. state politics and the legal framework for municipalities that is determined by the state) constant, two German *Länder* were chosen in a first step. In a second step, four cities were chosen for each *Land,* representing bigger cities (around and above 100.000 inhabitants) and smaller cities (20.000 – 50.000 inhabitants) with a

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different level of financial resources. Interviews were conducted with different local actors that are part of the local Europe-related networks: actors from municipal authorities (mayors, administrative staff in charge of European or town twinning matters), schools, local economy, and civil society (local associations, e.g. in the town twinning context). In each city, two to six interviews were conducted. In addition to these case studies, two interviews with German municipal umbrella organisations on their Europe-related work and their overview of cities' activities were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured by a general guideline that was adapted to each actor interviewed. They were transcribed and then coded using MAXQDA. The coding scheme was deductively developed to structure the empirical material, focusing on the four dimensions of Europe-related activities, the goals of Europe-related activities and the local Europe-related networks (see table 1).

4. Europe-related bottom-up mobilisation at the local level in Germany

4.1 Creating opportunities for citizen engagement – Local Europe-related activities

The role of cities and municipalities in mediating and co-creating citizens' bottom-up activities and their engagement with the EU is not only expressed by a variety of different activities, but also by different forms of interaction. For systematising these, we first present the results of our survey on municipal European affairs and classify them based on the findings from our case studies.

The results of our survey on the frequency of performing European activities in the four dimensions *uploading*, *downloading*, *horizontal networking* and *communication* show that the cities and municipalities in Germany pursue a variety of different activities, albeit to varying degrees and intensity. Comparing the frequency of the activities carried out in the four dimensions, it turns out that the cities and municipalities most often engage in activities that are either directly addressed to citizens and civil society actors or are carried out jointly with them (see table 2).

Table 2: Index of Europe-related activities

Dimension	Downloading	Uploading	Horizontal Networking	Communication
Average	2,9	2,7	3,1	3,3

Note: 1–5 scale (1: never – 5: often)

Two types of networks can be observed: Networks *within* cities and networks with *other* cities. The ubiquity of networks with other cities can be illustrated by the fact that the cooperation with partner municipalities in European countries within a formal town twinning represents the most frequently pursued European activity

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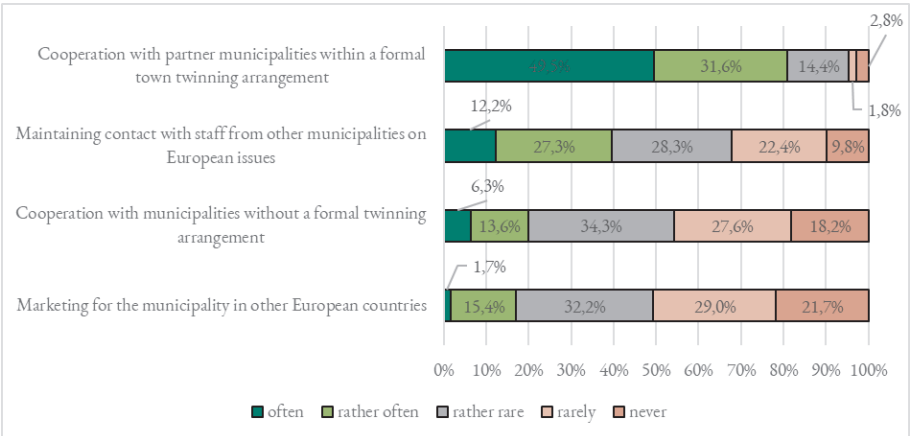
(see Figure 1). A total of 81.1 % of the municipalities stated to cooperate regularly with twinned towns. By contrast, only one fifth of the cities and municipalities stated to cooperate regularly with other European municipalities without a formal twinning agreement (19.4 %). Formal networks with other European cities by twinning thus play an outstanding role in the European engagement of many municipalities.

Figure 1: Europe related activities in the dimension of horizontal networking.



Source: Own chart (Survey question: How often are the following activities carried out by your local government?).

Networks *within* cities can be traced by focusing on the items in the dimension *communication.* Here, we surveyed European activities carried out by local authorities for or together with citizens and civil society actors (see Figure 2). These include the regular integration of civic engagement into the municipality's European activities (69.9 %), the support of youth exchanges with children and young people from other European municipalities (61.2 %) and the organisation as well as participation in exchanges with citizens from other European municipalities (59.3 %), for example from twin towns. Other activities, which are carried out somewhat less often but represent a significant part of citizen-based European activities accessible to a broader public, include the organisation of projects with children and young people (32.8 %), the organisation of information and discussion events (31.5 %) and the operation of a public information service on Europe and local European work (29.8 %). The participation in committees, working groups and events with European relevance within the own municipality is another activity that is regularly carried out by a considerable part of the cities (40.5 %).

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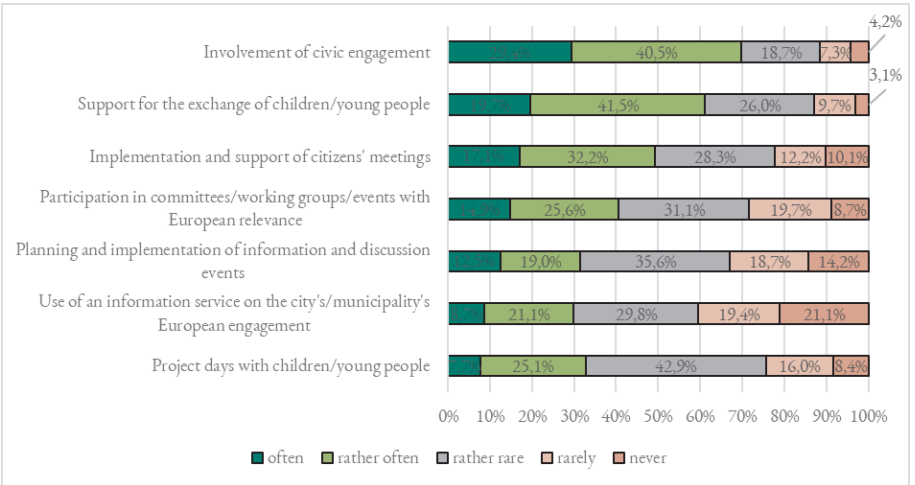
Figure 2: Europe related activities in the dimension of communication.



Source: Own chart (Survey question: How often are the following activities carried out by your local government?).

The high relevance of citizen-oriented European activities is also reflected in the target groups that local authorities, according to their own assessment in an open question, intend to address with their Europe-related work. The most important target groups of municipal European work include schoolchildren and young people, those involved in town twinning work in their own town and in the twin towns as well as local associations. Furthermore, the cities and municipalities also address with their activities all those actors who participate in the various topic-specific local or European networks, which include representatives from politics, administration, NGOs, civil society, sport, culture, and education. In addition to these more specific target groups, the cities indicated that the general public in their own municipality is also an important addressee of municipal European work. Thus, local administrations are interested in providing opportunity structures for citizen engagement.

The importance of networks, both within the cities and with other cities, can also be illustrated by the reported goals that cities pursue. The cities and municipalities in our survey rate the importance of the various goals of local European engagement differently (see Figure 3). A total of 95.0 % of the municipalities stated that maintaining and intensifying municipal partnerships was (very) important to them. Almost equally important is the improvement of cultural exchange between European municipalities, considered (very) important by 89.1 % of the cities and municipalities surveyed. Among the other objectives of local European engagement related to the citizens of a municipality, the promotion of civic engagement with

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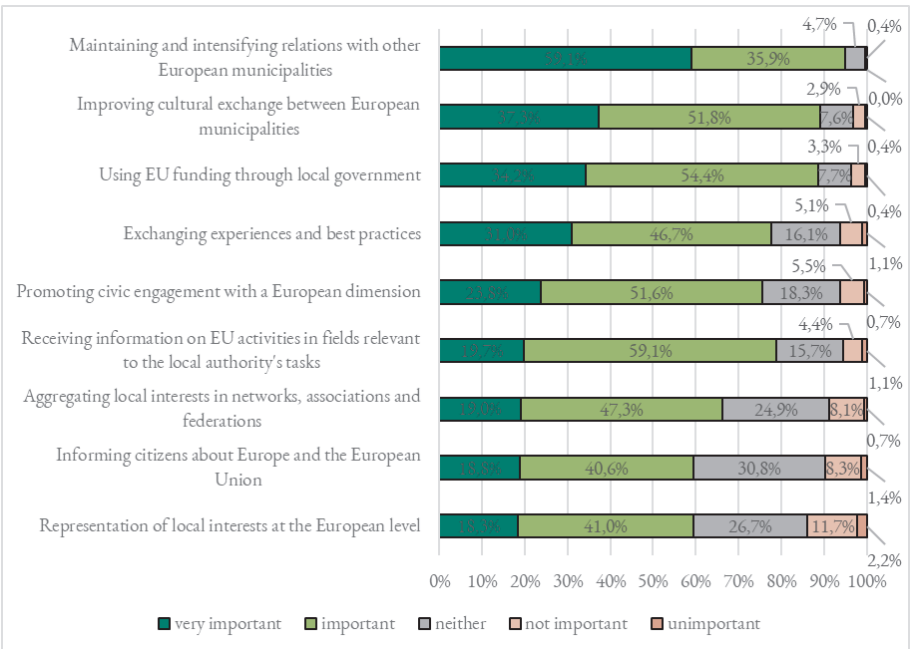
European relevance is in fifth place (75.4 % (very) important). By contrast to these objectives, the aggregation of interests in networks (66.3 % (very) important) and the effective representation of municipal interests at the European level (59.3 (very) important) have a much lower priority for municipalities. Thus, apart from the use of EU funds, the cities and municipalities in Germany pursue fewer benefit-oriented goals, understood here as the attempt to exert political influence in one's own favour. Instead, they prioritise goals that at first sight have no direct political or economic benefit, but which are based on a specific (common) understanding of Europe, the EU and the role of citizens.

Figure 3: Objectives of local European engagement.



Source: Own chart (Survey question: What are the objectives of your municipality's Europe related activities? How important are the following aspects for you?).

4.2 Resources for maintaining local networks

For analysing *how* EU-related bottom-up mobilisation takes place at the local level, we will take a closer look at the nature of local networks in which Europe-related activities are organised. We begin with the local governments, who often play a nodal role within these local European-related networks. For managing Europe-related activities, many municipalities have established organisational structures within their administration and have access to various resources (Klausen und Goldsmith 1997, S. 241; Münch 2006, S. 178; Bacon 2016, S. 114; Guderjan und Ver-

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helst 2021, S. 75). About two thirds of cities and municipalities have at least one organisational unit for European affairs within their local government (63.8 %). In a small group of cities and municipalities, the municipal European work is not only bundled in one EU office but is distributed over two (12.3 %) or three and more (3.8 %) units within the local government. The cities' focus on Europe-related activities is also reflected in the organisational decisions concerning the location and remit of staff responsible for EU affairs. The location of the office for EU affairs within the local administration and its area of responsibility differ between the cities and municipalities. Although we cannot quantify the information provided by the cities and municipalities in response to the open question about the organisational structure of their cities' European engagement – respondents answered the question at different levels of abstraction – the answers provide a valuable insight into the diversity of the organisation of Europe-related work in local governments. European affairs are by far most often located in the mayor's area of responsibility, followed by other departments like economy, culture, tourism, sport, public relations, finances, and citizens affairs. As our case studies reveal, only a few of the cities had staff explicitly responsible for European affairs (Europabeauftragte), but most had a town twinning coordinator.

Looking at the resources available for local European activities, about one third of the cities and municipalities rated the endowment with financial and human resources as adequate ("good", "very good") for fulfilling their tasks in the area of EU work, while two thirds of the municipalities considered these to be insufficient or at least not worth mentioning (see Figure 4). The different assessments of the endowment with financial and personnel resources observed in the survey have also become apparent in the case studies. According to the interviewees, Europe-related engagement, as a voluntary task, is seen as an addition to compulsory municipal tasks and therefore often not prioritised. Rather, Europe-related engagement competes with other voluntary tasks in the allocation of financial and human resources. In addition to staffing levels, the specific tasks performed by the staff officially responsible for European affairs vary considerably, depending on the priorities of a city's European engagement. By contrast to the endowment with "hard" resources (financial and personnel resources), the majority of municipalities (about three quarters) rated their networking resources, including the access to decision-makers, the access to information in the local administration as well as the cooperation with civil society actors, as positive ("good", "very good").

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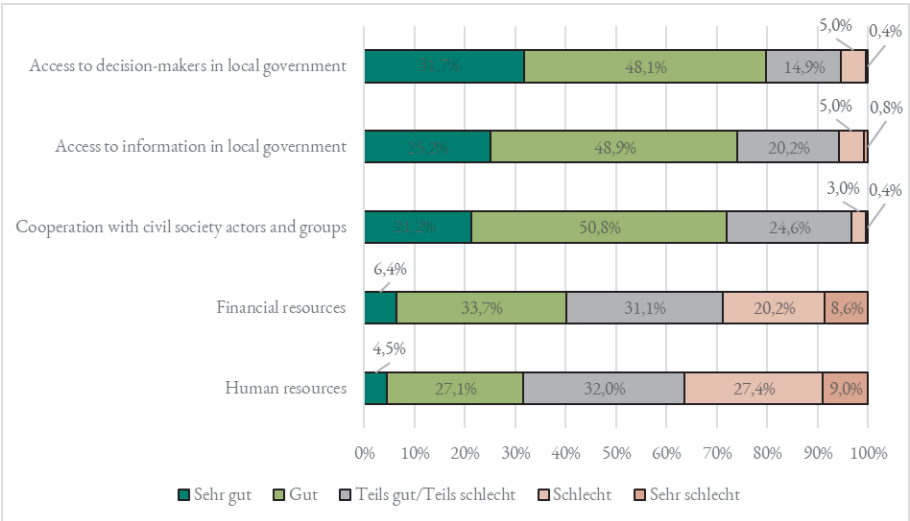
Figure 4: Organisational and resource-related foundations of German cities' European activity.



Source: Own Chart (Survey question: How do you assess the framework conditions for municipal European policy?).

The cooperation in local networks, consisting of representatives of the city administration, local politicians and civil society actors, thus has a significant role for the capability of municipalities to organise Europe-related activities. The high relevance of bilateral partnerships in the cities' Europe-related activities in the form of town twinning, already identified in the survey, also reflects in the structure of the local European networks in many cities. As our case studies have shown, these local networks have often developed around a city's twinning activities. Besides representatives from local government, these networks include local civil society actors, associations, schools or cultural institutions cooperating within the city in developing twinning projects and welcoming guests from the twinned city. Some cities have twinning associations for town twinning, mostly for a specific bilateral twinning, sometimes for all the city's twinnings. In addition, there are more loosely organised groups or individuals engaged in town twinning activities. Other important actors were schools, NGOs, sports groups, cultural institutions, and in some cases local economic actors.

The Europe-related networks of the individual cities are shaped by a variety of local characteristics such as individual engagement, path dependencies and framework conditions such as economic structure, and therefore take different forms. The networks differ in terms of the number of partnerships, their geographic focus, their intensity and rootedness in local civil society, and the actors involved in the network

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activities. Beyond the differences, however, there are several common characteristics that cut across the different organisational contexts and partnerships, all relating to the close connection between municipal actors, on the one hand, and civil society actors, on the other, in European-related bottom-up mobilisation.

Firstly, the close relationship between civil society and municipal actors in realising Europe-related activities is reflected at the organisational level. When asked about the organisational structure of the city, respondents also referred to civil society actors such as associations or committees. This illustrates that even the staff responsible for European affairs does not strictly distinguish between administrative and civil society actors. Moreover, the distinction between actors from the administration and civil society almost disappears in some cases. For example, one case city strategically sends municipal employees to participate in various civic and volunteer groups, while another has a representative in the citizen-led partnership association. In both cases, the aim was not to control the work of the civil society organisations, but to ensure continuity, to keep the organisations "alive" and to link the activities of the city and the citizens with each other.

Secondly, the municipality staff always stressed that the implementation of Europe-related activities crucially depends on the contributions of local network actors and civil society. While the town twinning coordinator of one case city explained that without civil society partners, they would not be able to organise the exchanges and activities, another indicated that the municipality is often only informed after an exchange that has been organised from civil society has taken place, instead of organising everything from the top down. Moreover, there is not necessarily a clear distinction between administrative action and civil society activities, as shown by an example where, on the one hand, citizens provide chapters for the city's official twinning report and, on the other hand, municipal resources are provided to civil society activities (e.g. the city's press officer). In other cases, civil society actors (such as twinning associations) or even private individuals participate in the design of twinning activities, e.g. by partially organising the programme for meetings and providing private accommodation for the guests.

Thirdly, twinning and other Europe-related activities, both in civil society associations and in local government, are highly personalised and driven by the commitment of individuals. In this way, over the years, individuals have often built up not only specialised expertise, e.g. in applying for funding, but perhaps more importantly, personal and sometimes friendly relationships with cooperation partners that are important for the realisation of local Europe-related activities. However, the great importance of individual commitment also has a downside. Many activities, for example in the context of town twinning, run the risk of not being able to be carried out in the future if the key actors retire for age reasons and there is no younger generation to take over.

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4.3 Forms of Co-creation in the four dimensions of Europeanization

Drawing on our case studies, we can observe different forms of co-creation together with individual citizens or associations across all four dimensions of Europeanization – downloading, uploading, horizontal networking and communication. Often, these only cover specific aspects of the overall activities in the respective dimension.

At first sight, *downloading* is not pertinent for co-creation. Implementing EU law is an administrative task. When it comes to the use of EU funding, though, we find several instances of co-creation, where citizens or associations get involved in acquiring EU funds for local projects. In one of the case cities (D-city), there was a civil society association specialized and professionalized in doing EU-funded projects on topics like EU rule of law. In the same city, the local administration in cooperation with the people active in a youth club managed to get EU funding for the modernization of said youth club. In another city, European funding for rural areas (LEADER) was the only noteworthy Europe-related activity, and one that was conducted in cooperation with civil society, using funding for different small-scale local projects. In several cases, the funding requirements for EU projects (e.g., including partners) provided an incentive for co-creation. Thus, the eligibility criteria for EU funding can foster processes of network-building and co-creation. However, as demonstrated by the aforementioned cases of civic engagement in connection with the acquisition of European funds, co-creation does not follow a mere rational purpose in the sense that municipalities involve citizens because this is a formal prerequisite for obtaining funding. Rather, there is a mutual interest and, in the cases we examined, genuine cooperation or co-creation can thus be observed.

Uploading, in turn, seems to be more suitable for co-creation from the first glance, given that it is about formulating European interests and communicating them to the European level. However, the comparatively low level of activity of local administrations in this dimension (see table 1) also showed in a low level of co-creation. Still, there are some examples of upload-related co-creation. In E-city, the local youth parliament cooperated closely with the city's European affairs officer. As a form of upload activity, the youth parliament developed a list of Europe-related demands directed at different levels of government (including EU level) that represented young people's interests and needs.

Most examples of co-creation were to be found in the dimension of *horizontal networking*. Nearly all case cities with the exception of one were active in town twinning, and town twinning is a prime example for co-creation. The concrete forms, however, differed. In B-city, for example, civil society associations not only cooperated with the city administration, but also did exchanges and projects independently. In C-city, the city strategically sends city representatives to participate in town twinning associations, for ensuring continuity and exchange. Co-creation is case-specific: in some cases, the networks are loosely knit, in others there are individuals carrying the cooperation over decades. The town twinning officer described

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their cooperation as "truly a symbiosis of administrative organization and voluntary organization" (town twinning officer C-city). Although many interviewees worried about recruiting problems, they nevertheless stressed the crucial role of citizen engagement in conducting a variety of horizontal networking activities.

Finally, for *communication* activities, we, too, found forms of co-creation. One example are events like Europe Day or festivals, where city administrations cooperate with citizens and associations in presenting their Europe-related work and addressing topics (e.g. in B-City). In C-city, the civil society actors could use the city's press mailing list for informing about their work. In E-city, the European affairs officer organized pop-up Europe Direct information centers at partners' venues.

In sum, we see that forms of co-creation can be found for all four dimensions of local level Europeanization. City administrations rely on civil society actors to make their Europe-related activities work. However, not all types of activities are equally suitable for co-creation. Some, like the implementation of European law, provide rather limited opportunity for cooperation with citizens and associations.

4.4 Types of co-creation networks

The survey results have shown the great emphasis that local administrations put on forms of horizontal networking. Drawing on Knoke's distinction of five types of relations in networks – resource exchange, information transmission, power relations, boundary penetration and sentimental attachments (Knoke 2011, S. 211) – we can systematize our observations (see table 2). The most important forms in the case studies were what he called exchange and sentimental attachments.

Table 2: Network types engaging in local Europe-related activities

Type of relation	Resource exchange	Sentimental attachment	Information transmission	Boundary penetration	Power relations
Empirical manifestations in the case studies	Both partners bring resources to the table	Two forms: personal level & shared normative ideas of Europe	Learning & best practices	Interest representation	---

Source: Own chart.

Resource exchange can grasp those kinds of cooperation that are based on different sides bringing in different types of resources. For example, city administrations provide the formal framework (e.g. twinning agreements), personnel (e.g. town twinning or European affairs officers) and a basic level of funding, while civils society actors contribute ideas, access to their networks, and organisational power. Concretely, this includes citizens hosting twin city guests in their private homes, organizing parts of the programme of a visit (H-city) or volunteers contributing reports on twinning activities for local council (C-city).

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Sentimental attachments include two forms of relations, which may empirically overlap: On the one hand, networks build on personal sympathy and cooperating with people one has good experiences working with. Many interviewees stressed the personal bonds and friendships they developed within networks. On the other hand, networks may also build on what we term "Europe as an idea" and a shared attachment to notions of creating a European society and promoting the "European idea". Engagement often is based on a shared normative understanding of *Europe as an Idea*, encompassing notions of European identity, society and community. Interestingly, actors not always clearly distinguished between notions of a broader Europe and references to the EU as a polity. Rather, both could be incorporated into an abstract "European idea". If such an abstract idea is shared it can serve as a basis for working together. As one city official noted, "So what I realize again and again is that it doesn't work without passion. As I said earlier, you have to identify partners over time who you can infect with a passion. Because if they, if I'm not passionate about it and only do it because it's on the agenda now, then it can't work. It has to be people who live it, who are convinced of Europe, who say, this is what we want, this is what we have to do, this is simply our history." (E-city European affairs officer) Within these networks, which usually include European affairs officers, town twinning coordinators, twinning associations, other civil society actors and individual citizens, and which focus on the organisation and implementation of citizen-oriented EU activities; Europe and European cooperation are conceptualised as a source of peace and mutual understanding. The narrative about Europe in these networks is distinctly one of both transactions and social bonding (cf. Baldassarri & Diani, 2007, 743–745). From the interviewees' perspective, exchanges, mutual visits and travelling help to get to know other Europeans better and to appreciate the diversity within Europe, for example of cultures, food, habits and way of life. According to the interviewees, visiting other European countries and other European citizens alters peoples' perspectives and makes them understand and feel European. In particular "doing Europe", for example by taking part in exchanges with twin cities, festivals, or projects, is seen as an important element for identification with Europe, as it is often associated with positive experiences and emotions. Moreover, such European activities would encourage mutual tolerance and respect, as well as prevent prejudice and racism. As already observed regarding the frequency of different European activities and goals of European, little priority was given to simply providing information about the EU and Europe in interviewees accounts of their activities, while emphasising the experience of Europe. Interestingly, Europe was rather rarely associated with socio-economic concepts, such as the notion of an area of convergence of living conditions.

Information transmission can be observed especially in the networks with other cities. Here, there are instances of cities exchanging best practices and learning from one another in addressing common challenges like skilled labour shortages

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or adapting to climate change. However, this learning from one another was often linked to a more basic sentimental attachment, e.g. to the idea of town twinning as a form of European society-building.

Boundary penetration takes the form of cooperation in formulating interests. As discusses above, this was less frequently pursued by cities and also only rarely organized in a process of co-creation. Still, the example of the local youth parliament and its Europe-related demands is one instance that can be typologized accordingly.

Finally, *power relations* were not relevant in the case studies. This may in part be due to Europe-related activities generally being a voluntary task for German municipalities. Co-creation, in turn, depends on citizens or associations willing and interest in engaging in such activities. They can be incentivised (e.g. by the eligibility criteria of EU funding) but not enforced.

5. Constraints, challenges and open questions referring to Europe-related co-creation

A special feature of local authorities' European involvement is that many local Europe-related activities are developed and implemented not only for citizens, but to a considerable extent by them or in cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal actors. This article therefore argues that there is considerable co-creation of activities and engagement with Europe and the EU. To study how citizens, civil society actors and municipalities interact, we analysed the Europe-related activities, organisational structures and local networks driving European engagement in German cities and municipalities by drawing on data from a survey of German cities with more than 20.000 inhabitants on their European engagement as well as case studies in eight cities. In summary, co-creation of Europe-related activities at the local level takes place through a variety of different citizen-oriented activities, often organised and carried out in local networks, which include representatives from local government, civil society actors, associations (but also schools or cultural institutions). This engagement is based on a normative understanding of *Europe as an idea* that encompasses notions of European identity, society, and community. By focusing on the cooperation between civil society and local actors in the organisation and implementation of European-related activities in local networks, our analysis provides a new perspective on the Europeanisation of the local level and on the way of local level mobilisation in the EU beyond the established channels for representing political interests. Interestingly, as our analysis has shown, Europe-related mobilisation at the local level is not necessarily directed at the EU as a polity, but towards Europe as a space to which people feel connected based on normative and ideational considerations as well as personal experiences.

However, there are also constraints, challenges, and open questions. Firstly, it is questioned how much impact the citizen-related local Europe-related activities have on the population of a city or municipality beyond the narrow circle of participants.

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Some of the cities and municipalities studied themselves stated that they would often only reach a limited group of participants with their activities and could only make their work better known, if at all, through good public relations and networking within a municipality. This is not only interesting from a political and practical point of view, but also highly relevant from a scientific perspective, as no study has yet investigated the impact of local European engagement on the attitudes and behaviour of a municipality's population. Keeping this observation in mind, we can – with regard to expectation two formulated at the outset of this article – state that the existence of long-established structures of cooperation between municipalities and citizens in relation to European issues (e.g. the organisation of town twinning schemes) can work as a basis for (continued) co-creation in the field of municipal European work which, however, has to be comforted by municipal engagement so as to persist. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that the local European networks and their activities are fragile, as they depend on civil society, individual engagement, and personal expertise. As they often lack institutionalisation, they can quickly disappear or change, as seen in some case studies. Thus, co-creation of Europe-related activities is thus in a state of constant change and raises the question of its perspectives for development. Regarding our third expectation formulated above, it has also become clear that a culture of intensive cooperation between local authorities and citizens and the existence of an active local civil society are important general prerequisites for Europe-related co-creation. Thirdly, our analysis has shown differences between cities and municipalities in both the scope and focus of local European-related activities, raising the question of the underlying reasons. As previous quantitative studies (Gröbe et al., 2023) and the case studies in particular have shown, resources play an important role for cities to establish and maintain local networks and to organise Europe-related activities – thus, we found indications so as to our first expectation being valid. In addition to these explanatory factors, the normative and ideational attitudes within the local networks and of key local actors should also be included in future analyses.

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