

The Fusion Approach – Applications for Understanding

Local Government and European Integration

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Abstract

The article explores the theoretical capabilities of the fusion approach as a conceptual ‘kit’ to explain the ‘bigger picture’ of European integration from a local government perspective. Fusion addresses the rationales and methods facilitating the transfer of policy-making competences to the European level. It understands European integration as a merging of public resources and policy instruments from multiple levels of government, whereby accountability and responsibilities for policy outcomes become blurred. The article argues that the fusion approach is useful to explain the systemic linkages between macro-trajectories and the corresponding change at the local level; the fusion dynamics of the local and European levels in a common policy-

cycle; the attitudes of local actors towards the EU. Although the article concludes that local government is rather modestly ‘fused’ into the EU, fusion approaches allow examining the extent to which the local level has become integrated into the European governance system.

Keywords

European integration, local government, fusion, Europeanisation, multilevel governance

Wordcount

7,982

Introduction

It has been widely recognised that European integration has prompted emerging patterns of interaction between local and European levels (see, e.g., Goldsmith and Klausen 1997; Keating 1999; Jeffery 2000; De Rooij 2002; Goldsmith 2003; Schultze 2003; 2008; Derenbach 2006; Münch, 2006; Van Bever, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2011). **Yet**, the study of the complex inter-relationship between the evolution of European governance and local government is still relatively under-researched from a conceptual perspective. Even where detailed empirical studies on the Europeanisation of local government exist (see, e.g., John 2000; Rechlin 2004; Zerbinati 2004; Marshall 2005, 2008; Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Goldsmith 2011), there is still further work to be done on how local government links into the overall evolution of European governance (Kettunen and Kull 2009, 119; Guderjan 2015, 938).¹

This article addresses these deficiencies by exploring the ‘bigger picture’ of local-supranational relations, and considers a ‘fusion-based’ framework **that establishes connections** with empirical micro-studies. The article argues that fusion approaches represent a useful conceptual ‘kit’ to further understand the overall dynamics affecting the relationship between European integration and developments at the local level. Starting with the fusion thesis, first introduced by Wolfgang Wessels to an international audience in 1997², fusion principally began as a dynamic middle-range

¹ Local government in the context of this article refers to cities, counties and municipalities.

² The fusion approach made its first appearance in an article entitled *Staat und (westeuropäische) Integration. Die Fusionsthese* by Wolfgang Wessels in 1992. The term ‘fusion approach’ is used in this article as a generic collective term covering the entirety of the fusion literature in including key components such as the fusion thesis, institutional fusion and fusion perspective(s).

thesis to explain the evolution of the European Union (EU), and the integration of West European states under a joint governance framework (Wessels 1997). Fusion addresses the rationales and methods facilitating the transfer of policy-making competences to the European level. It understands European integration as a merging of public resources and policy instruments from multiple levels of government, whereby accountability and responsibilities for policy outcomes become blurred.

Since the 1990s, the fusion approach has undergone a considerable conceptual development in response to the evolution of the EU, and over time, has expanded its focus to incorporate evaluations of subnational levels of government (see, e.g., Wessels 1998, 2000, 2009; Miles 2005, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Wessels, Maurer, and Mittag 2003; Lindh et al. 2007, 2009; Miles, Lindh, and Guderjan 2010; Diedrichs et al. 2011; Guderjan 2011, 2013, 2015). Although counties and municipalities have assumed an increasingly essential role in the delivery of EU policies and have become pro-actively engaged in EU affairs (Goldsmith and Klausen 1997; John 2000; Goldsmith 2003; Schultze 2003; Van Bever, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2011), the role of local government in the European integration process has been largely ignored in the fusion literature.³

Given the prior limited utilisation of the fusion approach in this area, the article advances the well-developed body of fusion literature by explicitly introducing a local government perspective. For this purpose, the article opens with a selective overview of the most relevant fusion concepts and assumptions, their meaning for the local

³ Wessels (2000) provided a brief assessment of fusion dynamics of German local government.

level and explanatory links to Multilevel Governance (MLG) and Europeanisation literature.

The article then moves on to examine to what extent the following three dimensions, that are at heart of fusion's understanding of European integration, apply to local government, namely: 1) the *systemic linkages* between macro-trajectories and the corresponding effects at the local level; 2) *fusion dynamics* of the local and European levels in a common policy-cycle to exert joint control over public policies; 3) the *attitudes* of local actors towards European integration. The article outlines the strengths and limitations of fusion approaches for each dimension. Though the conceptual flexibility of fusion approaches allows for introducing a local government perspective, we argue against a rigid application of fusion and instead advocate the modifying of understandings of fusion for the purpose of studying local government.

Fusion and local government

First introduced by Wessels (1992, 1997), the fusion thesis attempts to explain changes in the course of European integration in a delimited area over a certain period of time (Diedrichs et al. 2011, 11). Fusion is not necessarily a revolutionary new approach to European integration; yet it is distinctive in highlighting, and accounting for the merger of resources and decision-making capacities of government and administrations. National governments pool their sovereignty supranationally establishing shared institutions in order to meet the welfare expectations of citizens in times of growing European and global economic interdependences. European integration is assumed to be an open-ended 'third way' of governance that goes

beyond mere intergovernmental cooperation, which would be insufficient, but falls short of a European federal state that would threaten national sovereignty.

Under a synthesis of intergovernmental and supranational integration, member states do not need to transform into one European state, but rather merge their policy objectives, instruments, powers and competences under a shared system of governance. As the European polity grows and differentiates, its procedures and mechanisms have to incorporate increasing numbers of governmental and non-governmental actors from all member states. Thereby, accountability and responsibility for policy outcomes become blurred (Wessels 1997, 274, 2000, 123; Schneider 2011, 24 et seq.).

Although the fusion thesis explains developments at the national level of government, it offers significant insights into integrative processes beyond national politics. In the following, we argue that fusion is valuable for understanding European integration at the local level precisely because of its ability to capture dynamism and the asymmetries in the relations between actors and institutions across different levels of government.

The study of subnational governments within the EU has largely been undertaken through the conceptual lenses of MLG and Europeanisation. MLG provides notable insights into networks and interdependencies across local and European levels. Its focus on functional, flexible polycentric modes of governance and collective decision-making involving larger numbers of collaborating levels, groups and actors that do not directly challenge state authority (MLG type II; for a detailed discussion see

Marks and Hooghe 2004, 17 et seq.; Hooghe and Marks 2010, 18 et seq.) makes MLG an inherent element of the fusion approach (Lindh et al. 2007, 2009: 37). Both approaches emphasise moments of functional blurring and account for the shift of decision-making capacities from discrete territorial levels towards compound, overlapping networks (see also Bache 2008, 28; George 2004, 115).

While fusion does not challenge MLG, it does add and augment the dynamism of integration to the overall picture of local-supranational relations. Whilst MLG does not attempt to explain European integration, but rather governance patterns in a system that was already in place (Fairbrass and Jordan 2004, 152; George 2004, 113), fusion analyses the *systemic linkages* between the evolution of European governance and the responses within Member States (Miles 2005, 46; 2011a, 194-195). This article will further examine if this analysis also applies to the subnational levels.

The fusion approach provides a robust theoretical context linking the overall macro-dynamics of European integration to responsive micro-processes within Member States. Research on Europeanisation of local government deals generally with top-down, bottom-up and horizontal activities (see, e.g., John 2000, 881 et seq.; Schultze 2003; Rechlin 2004; Marshall 2005, 672-673; 2008; Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008; Kern and Bulkeley 2009, 312; Van Bever, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2011, 16 et seq.). Although Europeanisation concepts play an important role for local government in the context of European governance, they do not constitute explanatory theories of integration (Olsen 2002, 921 et seq.). Integration triggers Europeanisation and there is a wide field of studies looking at adaptation of activities and institutions within Member States (Börzel and Risse 2000; Vink and Graziano 2007, 3 et seq.). However,

integration refers not only to an internationalisation of activities, but also to an evolving system of interdependencies (Goldsmith and Klausen 1997, 5). The literature on Europeanisation suffers perhaps from ‘limited ambitions’ and a ‘lack of clarity’ in explaining their link to the EU’s supranational dynamics (Miles 2011a, 189; Guderjan 2012).

In the fusion approach, Europeanisation is assigned a rather explicit meaning – namely as representing increasing awareness of EU policies among actors and institutions (Miles 2007, 10; Guderjan 2015, 945) that is part of the overall integration process. Thereby, we can draw causal explanations of Europeanisation within a wider context. The following examines to what extent conceptual underpinnings of fusion have the efficacy to explain European integration of local government.

Systemic linkages between the evolution of European governance and responsive changes of local government

Based on the macro-fusion thesis, the concept of institutional fusion was developed through the works of Rometsch and Wessels (1996), and Wessels, Maurer and Mittag (2003) as a means of analysing the responses of member states to European integration. (West) European states have created – and continually reformed – institutions and procedures beyond their own borders. This has triggered a ‘loop’ of adaptation, whereby national institutions change according to a demand ‘pull’ from Brussels (Wessels, Maurer, and Mittag 2003, 3 et seq.). Fusion emphasises *systemic linkages* of the macro-trajectories of European integration and changes of agendas, competences and responsibilities amongst subnational, national and supranational

actors and institutions (Miles, 2005: 46; 2011a: 194-195). This section examines whether (institutional) fusion explains how European institutions and local government react, interact and adapt to the challenges of a new polity.

Systemic linkages describe how top-down legislations and policies lead to adaptation processes and responsive mobilisation towards Brussels. The increasing impact of EU policies on local authorities (for detailed discussion see, e.g., De Rooij 2002, 449; Rechlin 2004; Münch 2006, 127; Guderjan 2015, 941-942) indicates the significance of the local level in the evolution of European governance. As Goldsmith and Keating (1997, 5) suggested in their study of European integration and local government: ‘There are two sides to this: first, implementation determines whether or not integration takes place; second, implementation serves as a feedback and driving force to new undertakings which may accelerate or decelerate integration.’ The movement towards the ‘completion’ of the Single Market created a number of directives and regulations that affected the practice of municipalities and triggered engagement with EU policies (Rechlin 2004, 16 et seq.; Münch 2006, 127).

Since the mid-1980s onwards and with the introduction of the partnership principle to the EU’s regional and cohesion policy in 1988, local actors developed pro-active links with the Commission and the European Parliament (EP) (Goldsmith and Klausen 1997, 1 et seq.; Bache 2008, 45 et seq.). Financial incentives and top-down impact have attracted the attention of municipalities across Europe, and particularly between the late 1990s and early 2000s, local governments have to varying degrees, become Europeanised turned their attention towards Brussels. More and more local authorities adapted their politico-administrative structures, opened offices in Brussels,

participated in networks and developed strategies to promote their preferences on the European stage (Martin 1997, 63; Schultze 2003, 135; Zerbinati 2004, 1001; Marshall 2005, 669; Sturm and Dieringer 2005, 282; Fleurke and Willemse 2006, 85; Perrin 2012, 461 et seq.).⁴ The expansion of European policies provided opportunities for economic cooperation, partnerships amongst localities and institutional development of subnational entities (Mawson 1998, 226-227; Newman 2000, 899).

Although European integration altered some practises for municipalities, there are strong asymmetries to which extent the systemic linkages apply for local government. Catalano and Graziano (2011, 8) stated that the EU had only very limited impact on policy orientation at the local level. Similar results were found by Guderjan (2015) in England and Germany where local government is not comprehensively Europeanised. Eckert et al. (2013) concluded for a major city like Cologne that its municipal administration is aware of the EU's impact on its practise but not pro-actively Europeanised. Other studies in Germany (Münch 2006; Landua 2012) and in the Netherlands (De Rooij 2002) suggested that larger cities are more likely to adapt their administrations and employ at least one dedicated officers. Kull and Tatar (2015) found for Estonia, a small and new Member State, a lack of Europeanisation and structural and operational adaptation, partly because Estonian municipalities do not believe in having as say when it comes to European politics.

Kettunen and Kull (2009, 130) indicate a north-side divide in the status of the local vis-à-vis the national level that that translates into a stronger European engagement in the north and a weaker one in the south. In addition to the size of a municipality, its

⁴ Today there are 338 local and regional offices in Brussels (Panara 2015, 68).

resources, capacities and the gatekeeper position of national and regional governments, which are discussed at a later point, the availability and amount of European funding – particularly for prioritised targets area under the Structural Funds – are decisive for municipal mobilisation (De Rooij 2002, 464; Guderjan 2015, 944).

In line with the assumptions of institutional fusion, over time, the ‘pull’ of EU legislation and policies has evoked a ‘push’ from local government actors to become more involved in EU policy-making. The partnership principle and the establishment of the Committee of the Regions were early outcomes of these subnational ambitions. Throughout the 2000s, the Commission and the EP have become increasingly aware of the benefits in cooperating with local government on a systematic basis and started various initiatives to intensify their interaction with cities and municipalities; including the White Paper on European Governance of 2001 and the idea of Territorial Pacts between subnational, national and supranational levels (Reilly 2001; Atkinson 2002, 782 et seq.; Karvounis 2011, 215 et seq.).

Whereas these initiatives remained ambitious attempts, when the Cohesion Policy for 2007-2013 was subordinated to the Lisbon priorities of economic competitiveness and growth, and subsequently to the new Europe 2020 strategy, the ideas of partnership and dialogue were taken more seriously. This has attracted a strong interest as a framework to which local authorities relate their own policies⁵ (Catalano and Graziano 2011), and the local level has gradually taken a greater role for the delivering of policy goals (Van Bever, Reynaert, and Steyvers 2011, 236 et seq.).

⁵ The European Employment Strategy is another EU initiative that aims at mobilising the potential of localities by linking them stronger into the overall European framework (Catalano and Graziano 2011).

In particular, cities have become increasingly recognised as essential deliverers of policies related to economy, environment and social innovation and integration. Not only was the Directorate General (DG) for Regional Policy renamed DG Regional and Urban Policy in 2012, the European Commission has initiated an Urban Agenda that aims at adapting EU policies to local needs on a systematic basis and defining clear priorities and measures. A stronger incorporation of cities in the design of programmes is intended to achieve a ‘better coordination of policies, actors and governance levels (...). It could strengthen cities’ engagement and ownership of EU and national policy-making and implementation.’ (European Commission 2014b, 10) In how far these policy initiatives have led to more policy-making involvement for local government will be discussed in the next section.

On a constitutional basis, the status of local government was strengthened by the Lisbon Treaty. For the very first time, the EU refers the right to local self-government within its treaties (Art. 4.2 TEU) and extended the principle of subsidiarity explicitly to the regional and the local level (Art. 5.3 TEU). **Although the Lisbon Treaty indicated local government’s growing political role in a ‘Europe of four levels’ (Hoffschulte 2006, 63; Münch 2006, 115), such recognition in the treaties has not necessarily altered the practice of local government (Eckert et al. 2013, 62).**

Overall, fusion’s assumption of *systemic linkages* of push and pull dynamics are clearly not as strong for the local as they are for the national level of government. The *systemic linkages* between top-down impact, Europeanisation of actors’ awareness, institutional adaptation and bottom-up mobilisation do not apply to all local authorities equally and in some countries they have partly been reversed. **For**

example, by the beginning of the 2010s various English local authorities closed their Brussels representations and reduced their European capacities due to constraints on public budgets (e.g. England) (Guderjan 2015, 946). In terms of fusion, they could be regarded as evidence of ‘diffusion’ or ‘de-fusion’ that forms part of the fusion approach (Miles 2011a, 2011b). Indeed, even though local authorities may easily withdraw their European capacities and engagement (Zerbinati 2004, 1017), fusion’s underlying idea provides a valuable point of reference that allows for an assessment to what extent European integration has affected local authorities and vice versa.

The next section examines to what degree local government is interlocked or fused into a European system of governance. This has strong implications on the stability the *systemic linkages*, not only regarding the pull-effect of European policies and legislation at the local level but also in terms of ‘local pushes’ at the European level.

Fusion dynamics across multiple levels

According to the fusion thesis, European integration is characterised by the evolution of supranational institutions and the growing differentiation of decision-making procedures. As national policy-makers have turned their attention towards Brussels and sought access to EU decision-making, new formal arrangements have been introduced. National actors are not crowded out or replaced by the evolving supranational institutions, but are incorporated through differentiated and complex procedure as they push for access. Correspondingly, policy strategies, competences, responsibilities and resources are fusing (Wessels 1997, 280-282).

The litmus test for the fusion approach is thus whether local government actors and institutions are participating in EU policy-making and part of multilevel compound within which responsibilities over public policies are shared. Wessels (2000, 271-273) concluded that – until the mid-1990s – local authorities had not been incorporated in to the EU’s multilevel governance system as substantial partners. This article seeks to review and to some extent challenge these findings.

Institutionalised procedures for including local representatives in EU policy-making are marginalised. In Panara’s words (2015, 54): “...despite the fact that the roots of multilevel governance are in EU primary law, and that the EU lays down a framework for regional and local participation, it cannot oblige the Member States to create participation channels for the sub-national authorities or to use those prompted at Union level.” It is Member States that decide that local government associations have an observer status at meetings of the Council of Ministers but no channels of direct influence.

The Committee of Regions (CoR) provides local representatives with formalised access to EU policy-making. Whilst in some countries (e.g. England) local councillors are directly sitting in the CoR, in others (e.g. Germany) local authorities are indirectly represented through regional governments or municipal associations (Guderjan 2015, 947). The Lisbon Treaty strengthened the CoR as a watchdog of subsidiarity and its impact on legal proposals that affect subnational government should not be underestimated (for a detailed study see Neshkova 2010). Nevertheless, it does not match the political weight of Commission, Parliament and Council. Because the CoR has only advisory powers, has rather diverse membership, and is characterised by the

strong presence of regions, local representatives find it, to varying degrees, a useful body (Grimm 2011, 1528 et seq.; Kettunen and Kull 2009, 132; Guderjan 2012, 111 et seq.; Panara 2015, 67).

A mere focus on institutionalised procedures would perhaps conclude that *fusion dynamics* are of little relevance for the local level. European integration is, however, driven by formal and informal ‘networks and interdependencies in an ever-changing environment’ (Goldsmith 2003, 129). Fusion acknowledges that European governance develops not only through a legal constitution, but also through mutually reinforcing learning (Miles 2007, 8; 2011b, 78). The so-called ‘living constitutions’ needs to be highlighted in order to understand the ‘organic complexity’ (Miles 2011a, 197) of local-supranational relations.

Various scholars have argued that central governments have lost their monopoly over European policy and cannot exclude subnational authorities from EU policy-making anymore (Keating 1999, 8 et seq.; Jeffery 2000, 5; Schultze 2003, 135; Fairbrass and Jordan 2004). Local authorities have a variety of opportunities for bottom-up involvement (Eckert et al. 2013, 157; Van den Brande 2014, 6). Rather than dismissing the efficacy of the fusion approach, we see an added value in enhancing our understanding of fusion by accounting for informal channels, domestic intergovernmental arrangements and local government agents in local-supranational relations.

Callanan and Tatham (2014, 191) distinguish between regulatory mobilisation that aims pro-actively at influencing EU policies and legislation and financial mobilisation

referring to the more reactive acquisition of EU funding. The former addresses EU institutions directly – predominantly Commission officials and Members of the EP – or indirectly through domestic actors and agents. A few highly engaged municipal policy-makers and officers bypass the state level and occasionally enter the joint policy-making cycle, though not on a systematic basis (Guderjan 2015, 947 et seq.). The large majority of local authorities does not participate in EU policy-making and only a few can exert some influence over policy outcomes (e.g. UK) (Catalano and Graziano 2011, 6).

Whilst individual local authorities seek to access information and funding, local government associations generally undertake regulatory and political mobilisation. Associations with strong capacities (e.g. Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Netherlands, England, Germany, Estonia) pool the political weight and resources of their members and are thus more effective collectively than single municipalities (Kettunen and Kull 2009, 122; Montin 2011, 83 et seq. in Bever; Eckert et al. 2013, 162; Callanan and Tatham 2014, 199; Guderjan 2015, 248; Kull and Tatar 2015, 235). In addition to national municipal associations, transnational networks, such as EUROCITIES, CEMR, ELAN, CEEP and POLIS, provide local actors with effective platforms to promote their preferences and practices (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008; Marshall 2008, 101 et seq.; Witte 2011; Eckert et al. 2013, 161 et seq.; Guderjan 2011, 157; 2015, 947). Most relevant policy fields for which municipal agents lobby include public services and internal market, cohesion policy, environmental law, social and employment policies and, with increasing significance, immigration and refugee policies (Kettunen and Kull 2009, 134).

Intergovernmental arrangements and the position of local government within the Member States are highly influential upon the European activities of local authorities. Although local actors occasionally bypass their national and regional governments, the latter have more capacities and power to shape EU policies. Domestic cooperation is therefore an effective, proven means of promoting municipal concerns and particularly relevant for Member States with a strong formal recognition of local government and established forms of interaction (e.g. Scandinavia, Germany) (Kettunen and Kull 2009, 136; Callanan and Tatham 2014, 200-203; Guderjan 2015, 248). In Member States with strong regions, local authorities have usually closer constitutional and political links to their regional government and developed stronger cooperative patterns around European issues (e.g. Germany) (Kettunen and Kull 2009, 120; Eckert et al. 2013, 162 et seq.; Guderjan 2011, 157; 2015, 948).

The case of Estonia shows that local government's weak position within a state can hinder activities beyond national borders. Though informal cooperation has been slowly evolving, Kull and Tatar (2015) speak here of mobilisation 'through' rather than 'beyond' the state. Bypassing is a preferred strategy when interests of local, regional or national governments are clashing or they are for other reasons ineffective, such as a lack of institutionalised procedures, limited state interest or weak in cooperation among local government (e.g. Ireland) (Callanan and Tatham 2014, 200-203). Overall, bypassing and cooperation often represents complementary strategies depending on the policy context.

Cohesion Policy provides a good case to illustrate a trend towards a fusion of strategies, competences and resources across multiple levels, as well as the constraints

upon the stronger involvement of local government in EU policy-making. By intention and with varying success, the 2014-2020 Cohesion Policy fosters stronger policy cooperation across different levels and more effective means for local authorities to exert control and influence over resources and outcomes; particularly in the fields of growth, unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Strategic investment and Partnership Agreements seek to foster stronger involvement of local partners and the empowering of cities to not only deliver but also design policies. The partnership principle has become a legal requirement at all levels and programming stages (see Article 5, Regulation 1303/2013), and the Commission has committed itself to monitoring compliance via the Code of Conduct on Partnership. The EU may even suspend funding, if Member States do not link their programmes to Europe 2020 (or comply with recommendations of the European Semester on institutional capacities at subnational levels) (European Commission 2014a). This illustrates how deeply interwoven policy delivery has become.

Despite these commitments and new legal frameworks by the Commission, involvement, and *fusion dynamics* respectively, of local government is highly asymmetrical across and within Member States. A CEMR study (2013) states that about a third of all Member States has applied the Code of Conduct on Partnership fully or to a satisfactory level. Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark, Cyprus, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands and Portugal are examples of an effective and systemic empowerment of local governments in the design of operational programmes. Other countries, however, struggle to implement genuine multilevel partnerships (Van den Brande 2014). Vertical (and horizontal) partnerships in south-east Europe (e.g. Greece, Slovenia, Croatia; Bach et al. 2011) and various central and east European

countries (e.g. Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania) are obstructed by centralised governance traditions and limited capacities, but have for some localities evolved through practical experiences and learning processes (Lawrence 2010; Dabrowski 2014). And yet, although the local level is increasingly engaged a multilevel compound under the cohesion policy, it has not necessarily secured significant control and influence on policy (Kull and Tatar 2015, 251).

Perhaps the most important factor that determines *fusion dynamics* at the local level is the status of local authorities within the domestic politico-administrative structures. National governments remain strong gatekeepers and watch over the ability of local government to participate effectively in European affairs (Atkinson 2002, 785 et seq.; Guderjan 2012, 20). Some highly centralised countries (e.g. Estonia) only fulfil the minimal requirements of the partnership principle and produce highly prescriptive operational programmes objectives that do not allow local authorities to realise their priorities. In addition, the engagement with European policies depends on the size of a municipality, its institutional capacities and on entrepreneurial actors (Eckert et al. 2013, 158-159; Dabrowski 2014, 378 et seq; Callanan and Tatham 2014, 190; Kull and Tatar 2015, 235 et seq.).

Potential *fusion dynamics* are also limited to specific – though an increasing number of – policies primarily framed by Cohesion Policy and Europe 2020. Nonetheless local authorities across Europe have entered the European *Politikverflechtung*, a compound, blurred governance arrangement, and they contribute to European integration (Derenbach 2006, 77-78). **Municipal access to EU policy-making is underdeveloped; nevertheless, local actors do use the EU for articulating their**

interests and objectives and create ‘a context of reciprocal influence’ (Catalano and Graziano 2011, 5). The engagement of local government with EU policies may be constrained by political or bureaucratic resistance from national executives, and yet socio-economic pressures and supra- and subnational trends foster stronger multilevel cooperation (Guderjan 2012, 120). Notwithstanding limits in terms of implementation, we can witness on-going attempts to improve and formalise the coordination of competencies, resources and accountabilities using a common policy-cycle. Therefore, the fusion approach provides a worthy perspective to further examine the role of local government in the European integration process – without assuming an ‘ever closer fusion’.

Attitudes of local government towards European integration

Municipal engagement in EU affairs is determined by the politico-administrative system and institutional capacities, as well as by actors’ preferences, interests and attitudes (Dabrowski 2014, 378). In order to understand, the motives behind local mobilisation, and consequently behind the evolution of *systemic linkages* and *fusion dynamics*, it is thus important to examine the *attitudes* of local government towards European integration. Based on the fusion thesis, Miles (2005, 28 et seq.; 2011b, 83 et seq.) developed the micro-fusion perspective to look at the attitudes of state actors and the formulation of national preferences towards European politics. This perspective comprises three differing, yet complementary concepts of how domestic policy-makers perceive the integration process – *performance fusion*, *political fusion* and *compound fusion*. Subsequent to Miles initial work, the micro-fusion perspective has been applied to explain the attitudes of regional and local actors towards

integration (Miles, Lindh, and Guderjan 2008; Lindh et al. 2007, 2009; Guderjan 2011, 2015). The following provides further insights into the usefulness of the micro-fusion perspective to explain the municipal support or resistance towards the EU.

1. Performance fusion assumes that Member States join the EU and support the integration process because they expect the EU to deliver economic and political benefits. As outlined by the fusion thesis, national policy-makers adopt a ‘performance-related integration mentality’ according to which they are willing to pool sovereignty in a common problem-solving arena and accept the obligations of EU membership in order to strengthen and complement their policy objectives and instruments (Miles 2005, 33).

In line with *performance fusion*, despite some constraints and the burden of additional bureaucracy of EU legislation, local actors (e.g. in England, Germany) acknowledge the benefits of integration positively. The support for EU membership is based on economic and integrative macro-benefits (peace and stability), as well as on the financial benefits of the Structural Funds, CAP and rural development policies and opportunities for transnational cooperation (Guderjan 2011, 160-161; 2015, 949).

2. Political fusion suggests that national actors prefer a third way exit between intergovernmental cooperation (*de facto* erosion) and a European federal state (constitutional erosion). The majority of policy-makers are ‘pro-supranational integration, yet federo-sceptic’ (Miles 2005, 35). Supranationalism gives member states the potential to achieve common objectives that they could not attain on their

own. Whilst in certain policy fields they prefer supranational solutions, in other areas the preference is for intergovernmental arrangements.

Although local actors are too little involved in major decisions about the EU's trajectories, those who are engaged in European affairs tend to adopt a political mind-set according to which local autonomy should be preserved but common macro-challenges, such as economic growth, peace and stability, regional development and environmental protection, have to be dealt with on a supranational basis. Consequently, local actors strongly support a clear demarcation of competences through subsidiarity and the right to local self-government provided in the Lisbon Treaty (Hoffschulte 2006; Münch 2006, 115; Eckert et al. 2013; 58 et seq.; Guderjan 2015, 949). This meets *political fusion's* assumption of a preference for a third way integration between intergovernmental cooperation and supranationalism.

3. According to *compound fusion*, national policy-makers see the EU 'as a kind of state-like administrative system that works in conjunction with the existing nation states rather than serving to replace the latter. This is labelled a compound fusion.' (Miles 2005, 38) National governments and administrations, as well as other public and private actors, have realised that the EU offers them advantageous channels and instruments that can serve their own interests. In consequence, not only the elite at the national level, but also agencies and relatively low elite specialists from multiple institutions and levels, have increasingly turned their attention to Brussels (Miles 2005, 38 et seq.).

Various studies (see, e.g., Kettunen and Kull 2009, 135; Guderjan 2011, 160-161; 2015, 949) found that the Commission is perceived as being insensitive to municipal practise, constraining public service delivery and inter-municipal cooperation and creating legal uncertainty (e.g. in Estonia, Finland, Germany). Thus, there is, at least among a majority of local actors, limited appetite to be part of a multilevel compound that mostly works top-down and seems to be 'far away' from their daily routine (Witte 2011, 294).

Most local actors may not perceived European governance as an inclusive system that can serve their immediate interests. The fact that local actors need to become proactive in order to promote their preferences at the European level limits the explanatory capacities of *compound fusion* to local policy-entrepreneurs and a few engaged actors who have learned to use the multiple channels through which they can exert some influence (see Dabrowski 2014 for Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary). Nevertheless, though direct mobilisation is not considered by most individual authorities, they may well appreciate their indirect participation in EU policy-making through regional and national governments, and municipal associations and networks.

Compound fusion may also more adequate for local government with a weak status and within centralised state arrangements, since they are used to compete for within a pluralistic environment for the attention of their government. Local government in England, for example prefers a more flexible involvement in EU policy-making than German local actors, who promote formal channels of access at the European level (Guderjan 2015, 949).

The micro-fusion perspective addresses important rationales and dynamics underpinning the engagement of local government with EU policies and politics. Although there are motives beyond a cost-benefit analysis, such as an emerging Euroscepticism in the course of financial and refugee crises, *performance fusion* is able to explain general support for European integration at the local level. *Political fusion* and *compound fusion* provide a more differentiated picture across Europe's local authorities, which is strongly determined by politico-administrative traditions and not as clearly articulated as for national governments.

Conclusion – trends and future research agenda

Through the lenses of fusion approaches, this article has sought to locate local government within the overall dynamics of European integrations. EU institutions and national governments remain at the core of the European project. The incorporation of local government in EU governance is less an issue of missing awareness in Brussels but of an insufficient implementation within Member States. Still, municipalities are part of a transformative process that affects all Member States, and especially cities have fed back into an evolving Union.

The analysis of *systemic linkages*, *fusion dynamics* and *attitudes* demonstrates that the fusion approach represents a useful 'kit' to address a systematic study of European integration from a local government perspective that adds to the works on MLG and Europeanisation processes. The application of fusion approaches allows examining the extent to which the local level has become integrated into the European governance system. The article's findings show clear limitations in this respect.

Financial incentives and top-down impact have attracted the attention of municipalities across Europe, but local governments are hardly coherently Europeanised. Although the pull of European integration triggered the establishment of European capacities within local administrations, the *systemic linkages* can be demonstrated particularly for pioneering authorities and can also be reversed. The push of local government has also evoked an adaptation of the EU's polity.

Actual *fusion dynamics* hold relevant, albeit comparatively little substance as formal involvement of local governments in EU decision-making is marginal; local representatives rely on informal channels; the scope of policies through which local government interacts with the European level is significantly smaller than for the national level; and only a small number of municipal actors and agents engage show signs of regulatory mobilisation. Pro-active cooperation with higher levels is determined by domestic constitutional settings, the 'good will' of national and regional governments, administrative capacities, resources and entrepreneurial actors. Cohesion policy demonstrates a development towards a system of joint management across multiple levels under which competencies, resources and accountabilities are merging.

The micro-fusion perspective provides a valuable framework to explain local actors' *attitudes* towards integration, and consequently their willingness to fuse with Europe. *Performance fusion* illustrates the general support for European integration based on cost-benefits analysis. Despite their limited influence on the EU's major trajectories, we can witness a preference for a *political fusion* that requires common supranational

solutions coupled with safeguards to local self-determination. The appreciation of the EU inclusive, *compound* nature rather applies to local actors that are used to rely on flexible interest representation than to actors who can rely on a strong formal status within their domestic policy-making arenas.

The fusion approach offers exciting opportunities to apply new thinking to the area of local government and European integration, and thereby to overcome existing mismatch. In order to strengthen the conceptual kit – and thereby the utility – of fusion for the study of local government, further research and in-depth case studies are important to assess the relevance of fusion in relation to alternative politico-administrative systems, historical trajectories and geo-political profiles. The new programming period of 2014-2020 offers a valuable occasion to study whether country-specific recommendations, Strategic Investment and Partnership Agreements evoke a closer fusion – formally and informally – of capacities, procedures, agendas and recourses across multiple levels.

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