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Research Article

Pathways to the EU: an Analysis of German EU Youth Policy Coordination

Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll and Daniella Keilberth

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Abstract

In the light of domestic coordination processes in federal states, this article deals with the interplay of domestic governmental and non-governmental actors in the development of a German position for negotiations in the EU youth policy field. The qualitative single-case study is embedded in the evaluation of the German implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2010-2018). It focusses on the roles, mutual perceptions, conflicts, and resulting action strategies of the different actors involved in the domestic coordination processes. In doing so, the article adds to the debate on Europeanisation and domestic coordination processes in federalist states by facilitating an understanding of the extent to which differ- ing framework conditions of a specific policy field at the domestic and EU-Level can influ- ence domestic policy coordination and its bottom-up processes.

The analysis reveals a discrepancy between the intentions of the actors to work together based on a multi-level governance approach, and a reality in which the Federal Ministry assumes a gatekeeper function. The problems following this discrepancy can be explained on the one hand by different perceptions and expectations the actors have towards the coordination process and on the other hand by a lack of a youth policy culture of debate. The article shows how these problems lead to different action strategies by the domestic actors and the use of different pathways to bring their interests to the EU level. Simultaneously, the findings show that these different strategies of action can successfully lead to a stronger German position, provided these pathways are used in a coordinated manner. The analysis shows that a domestic coordination process involving both governmental and non-governmental actors from different levels working together on an equal footing by using a multi-level governance approach, can only function in federal policy cooperation processes when the actors focus on content-related discussions rather than formal forms of cooperation.

Keywords

Domestic coordination process; Governance; Youth policy; Europeanisation

European Union (EU) policy coordination in federal states is a complex and multi-actor process. The constellation of federal and sub-national actors, each with their own interests, but who can only speak with one voice in negotiations at the European level, results in a complex interplay of actors and their policy positions. Such domestic coordination processes have been extensively researched. In particular, research has been done on the procedural differences between centrally organised and federal states (e.g. Kassim, Peters, and Wright 2000) and on the role of individual organisational units (e.g. Kassim et al. 2001). Research on domestic policy coordination in federal states has also focused on the coordination process with regard to federal and sub-national governmental actors, as well as to their effectiveness (e.g. Sepos 2005).

Much less is known about the role of non-governmental stakeholders within this process. Within the framework of a 'bottom-up Europeanisation' perspective (Börzel and Panke 2016, 116–19) on European integration, this article analyses the interplay between governmental and non-governmental actors as stakeholders in the domestic coordination process of EU Youth Policy in a federal state. Our research interest is the roles, mutual perceptions, conflicts as well as action strategies of involved actors that arise through this interplay. In the present article, we take a closer look at EU youth policy coordination in Germany and in particular Germany's implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018.

Although it has been somewhat neglected in EU studies, EU youth policy has developed significantly over the past twenty years (Williamson, Fras, and Lavchyan 2021, 67ff.). It is governed by the open method of coordination and one of its major characteristics is its reliance on and close cooperation with youth organisations and other civil society organisations. Such cooperation is also a characteristic of German youth politics. Youth policy coordination and cooperation between the Federal Government, the Länder, local authorities and non-statutory youth organisations is regulated by law. These principles of federalism and subsidiarity are supported by a multi-level governance approach with regard to the German implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (Baumbast, Hofmann-van de Poll, and Rink 2015). It follows that in the youth policy field, a complex multi-actor coordination process with vertical and horizontal coordination elements is in place.

A closer look at policy coordination within individual policy fields can provide us with more in depth information on policy coordination processes in general. We argue that the framework conditions of a policy field influence the complexity of such processes. Against this background, our research findings point to the fact that a domestic coordination process involving both governmental and non-governmental actors from different levels, working together on an equal footing by using a multi-level governance approach, can only function in federal policy cooperation processes when the actors focus on content-related discussions rather than formal forms of cooperation.

To lay out our argument, we build on the theoretical foundations of domestic coordination processes in the context of Europeanisation. After outlining the framework of youth policy in the EU and in Germany, we discuss domestic coordination of EU youth policy in Germany. We do so by analysing two problems that were identified by actors involved in the coordination process. The first problem is that of different perceptions and expectations towards the coordination process. The second problem concerns the lack of a culture of debate when it comes to the coordination of German EU youth policy. Finally, in our conclusion we point out the implications of our research findings for the understanding of domestic coordination processes in federal states such as Germany. However, before we lay out our arguments and conclusions, we first discuss the theoretical foundations our research relies on.

EUROPEANISATION AND DOMESTIC COORDINATION PROCESSES

Europeanisation is understood as a bipartite process in which the integration of European policies into member states' policy (top-down processes) and the integration of domestic impulses into EU policies (bottom-up processes) are interrelated (Börzel 2005, 62; Wallace 2005, 39). The interaction between this "shaping and taking" is a relatively new field of Europeanisation research (Börzel and Panke 2016, 119). The EU influences member states' policy, directly through regulations and directives, and indirectly through resolutions, im pulses, and programmes. Member states are active shapers of EU policies, processes, and institutions, exerting influence on the possibilities and character of European policy-making. They play a central role in the EU decision-making process, determining the point of entry to the various phases of the political processes within the EU and consequently being involved in the setting of agendas, negotiations, subsequent decision-making and, ultimately, the implementation of any given policy (Saurugger 2009, 123). The quality and speed of European decision- and policy-making is influenced both by how EU policies are coordinated and processed domestically and by which individual styles and strategies member states pursue in "uploading" their impulses and interests. Consequently, when it comes to EU policies, domestic decision-making and coordination processes are of central importance for a comprehensive understanding of Europeanisation (Kassim 2000, 257).

As a result of these Europeanisation processes, governments coordinate their actions at and between at least two levels, i.e. the domestic and the European. Providing feedback regarding actions on the one level to the other level is also of central importance. Each of these levels places its own demands on the government with regard to their political structures and dynamics. This interplay is further complicated in federal states, where European policy may be a competence of the federal government, but the content-related competences are at regional or even municipal level. Consequently, there are a multitude of actors and interest groups at both levels who interact at and between the levels, introducing their own concerns and demands. In addition, both European and domestic politics impose certain rules on the actors within the framework of existing political structures (Kassim 2005, 290, 2001, 1). Member states have to observe EU rules and regulations and these will have a direct impact on their domestic coordination processes as these frame the roles domestic actors have in the EU, favouring certain domestic actors over others (Kassim 2000, 254).

These requirements can pose major challenges to member states and their domestic actors. On the one hand, member state governments need to ensure that they react to EU proposals with a unified and coherent national voice in order to effectively incorporate and defend national interests in the EU arena (Sepos 2005, 170). On the other hand, these requirements and structures also offer new opportunities at the EU level for national governments, domestic interest groups and regional authorities. Member state governments can seek allies to support their preferences, form coalitions or blocking minorities and influence the outcome of decisions in the Council. In this way, they can achieve goals that they could not have achieved individually (Kassim 2005, 288; 290, 2001, 17; Wallace 2005, 38f.). Domestic interest groups can use the multi-level structure of the EU to gain access to key decision-makers and resources and "channel" their interests into the EU (Ladrech 2005, 322). In federal states, other governmental actors like the offices of the regional authorities of federal states also contribute to new information flows. As they facilitate the establishment of strategic relationships with European partners, these offices can be used to pursue common policy goals (Moore 2006, 198f.; Wallace 2005, 34).

Domestic coordination of EU policies is thus influenced by the framework conditions and guidelines at the European and domestic level. Depending on the policy field, these framework conditions can differ and lead to a more or less complex domestic coordination process. In federal states, the different distribution of competences between

federal, regional and municipal levels could make coordination even more complex. In this respect, the German youth policy coordination process can provide more detailed insights in actor's perceptions and policy coordination. However, before introducing the politics of German youth policy and German coordination processes of EU youth policy, we first present our research design.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This research uses a qualitative case study approach to analyse how domestic coordination of a soft law policy field, governed by the open method of coordination, takes place in a federal state.

We used document analysis and qualitative semi-structured interviews to trace the pathways, roles and action strategies used by the actors involved in the process of agreeing on an official national position to be presented to the EU. The aim of our research was to examine the general coordination process during the period of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany (2010-2018) – or what the actors remember about it and their perceptions of it. This time frame was chosen because it represents a new type of cooperation between German actors regarding EU youth policy (Baumbast, Hofmann-van de Poll, and Rink 2015). The focus was on the coordination process in general rather than on the contents of the policies or the coordination process of individual EU Council conclusions or resolutions.

Political topics and relevant actors in this period were identified based on existing data material on the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany. The identified actors reflected the perceptions at the political level of the Federal Government and the Länder and also those of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).They were interviewed in two rounds. A first series of interviews took place in 2017 and was comprised of seven qualitative, semi-structured telephone interviews with federal, Länder and NGO actors involved in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany. At the time of the interviews, the interviewees were involved in the implementation process to varying degrees (very involved in the process, with a minor role in the process, not directly involved in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy but actively involved in European youth policy, active in a parallel process in Germany promoting independent youth policy). Through the diverse selection of interviewees, it was possible to get a multifaceted picture of the coordination process in Germany.

The second round of qualitative, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews took place in Brussels in 2018 with five people who work for German and European institutions and organisations that address youth policy issues. The first set of interviews had identified these institutions and organisations as important coordinating actors in Brussels. One interviewee was a representative of one of the EU institutions, while the others worked in Brussels for the Federal Government, the Länder, and German NGOs. Actors at the municipal level and their representatives, the national associations of local authorities, had not been mentioned by the interviewees in the first round and so their organisations were not included in the second round of interviews. The aim of this second series of interviews was to add the perspective of German actors in Brussels to the coordination process that could be traced from the first interviews.

By combining the interview results of the first and second rounds, it was possible to reconstruct the process of agreeing on an official German position, to identify alternative pathways to bring German interests in EU youth policy negotiations, and to analyse perceptions and expectations towards a German coordination process. Furthermore, it was possible to ascertain how the different actors interacted in the process. The interviewees were asked about the course of the coordination process, and to evaluate its successes and challenges.

The interviews were fully transcribed and subsequently anonymised. Analysis was based on the method of content-analysis proposed by Mayring (2015), using MaxQDA® to process the data. The first step in this process was to open code the data generated in the interviews to determine the first units of analysis (cf.Mayring 2015, 61ff.). Subsequently, the coded sections of text were paraphrased. Based on the code allocation and the paraphrasing of the coded analysis units, an inductive category system was developed along three main categories: the role of each actor, the networks that had emerged between actors, and the structural, actor-related and content-related challenges with regard to the establishment of a national position that were encountered by the actors. Subsequently, it was analysed how the results of the individual categories were connected and which elementary problems could be derived from this for the entire coordination process (ibid., 71ff.).

This research contributes to the study of domestic coordination processes in federal states, their course, conditions, problems and successes, under the framework of different policy fields. The results of the study help to clarify the relationship between state and non-state actors in these very coordination processes. Germany, as a federal state, was chosen as a case study because it extended the existing principle of subsidiarity in the field of implementing European youth policy to include a multi-level governance approach (Baumbast, Hofmann-van de Poll, and Rink 2015). With this approach, non-state actors claim to be more involved in national processes of bottom-up Europeanisation.

YOUTH POLICY IN THE EU AND GERMANY

Youth policy is a part of social policy and focusses on policies directed towards the transition between childhood and adulthood, i.e. the youth phase of life (c.f. Chevalier 2019; Wallace and Bendit 2009). On the one hand, it deals with the needs, rights and obligations of young people arising from this phase of life, and on the other hand with the tasks and structures of state and non-state actors arising from this phase of life. With different welfare state notions and institutional arrangements underlying youth policy in European states (Wallace and Bendit 2009), the continuous development of an EU youth policy since 2001 is remarkable. Although traditionally a marginal policy field in which very little research has been done, it did gain momentum recently when more attention was drawn to the economic and democratic importance of young people as the "future of Europe" (Leyen 2021). EU youth policy is governed by the open method of coordination and has developed around consecutive frameworks of youth policy cooperation, set out in the EU Youth Strategy (Council of the European Union 2009, 2018). One of the characteristics of the EU youth policy field is its close cooperation with civil society, especially youth organisations and young people. Non-governmental organisations like the European Youth Forum are important partners in policy development. The role of youth organisations and sub-national levels in policy formulation and implementation was particularly stressed in the EU Youth Strategy 2010- 2018, where it is stated that young people and youth organisations should be involved in policy making, implementation and follow-up. Furthermore, cooperation with local and regional authorities should be strengthened (Council of the European Union 2009, 5). Prior to negotiation in the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) and policy adoption in the Council of EU Youth Ministers, EU youth policy negotiations took place in the Youth Working Party. During the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018, negotiations varied from Council conclusions on youth work, non-formal education, and training and mobility, and a resolution on the new EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027, to regulations on the Erasmus+ programme, and the European Solidarity Corps.

In Germany, youth politics is based on the principle of subsidiarity, according to which a higher level of government may only take on tasks if a lower level is unable to do so on its own. Whereas European policy is the responsibility of the Federal Government, in

cooperation with the Länder (§23 Basic Law), youth policy, and more specifically youth welfare services, are the responsibility of the Federal Government, the Länder, municipalities and non-statutory youth welfare organisations. Their respective tasks and responsibilities are written down in the Child and Youth Welfare Act of 1990. Besides youth welfare services, youth policy also includes parts of other policies, such as education and employment policy. This means that both vertical, horizontal and cross-sectoral coordination is a prerequisite. Horizontal coordination is based on departmental responsibility ("Ressortprinzip") of the individual federal ministries to define European policy (Derlien 2000; Hegele 2016; Beichelt 2007). In the case of EU Youth Policy, jurisdiction lies with the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). Vertical coordination points towards the involvement of regional entities, i.e. the Länder, in coordinating processes (Moore and Eppler 2008; see Derlien 2000; Hegele 2016), whereas cross-sectoral coordination refers to policy coordination between actors of different policy areas (Hofmann-van de Poll 2017).

As the ministry with the broadest jurisdiction, the BMFSFJ has a defined role in the process of taking a German position in the EU negotiations. It draws up the domestic position based on the coordination process between these levels and passes this position, otherwise known as an instruction, on to the German Permanent Representation in Brussels. The Permanent Representation takes the instruction into the EU negotiations. These negotiations take place in Working Groups before the documents are finalised in COREPER and adopted by the Council of the EU. (1762_35[1]; 1586/1_7; see Huber 2002: 177-178). In addition to these regulations and defined roles, there are other options of promoting a position in the EU. For example, Länder, non-statutory child and youth services providers and youth organisations are able to promote their interests by exchanging their ideas and opinions with European actors in Brussels. In addition to the official path through a domestic position, actors use alternative pathways of exerting influence and voicing their positions.

Prior to the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018, an institutionalised cooperation of German EU youth policy affairs remained within the strict boundaries of subsidiarity and the jurisdictions of each level (Baumbast, Hofmann-van de Poll, and Rink 2015). But with the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018, the Federal Government and the Länder opted for a new way of cooperation. A multi-level governance approach was introduced to complement the principle of subsidiarity. This was an institutionalised, content-related cooperation between different actors and levels. Instead of individual actors making autonomous decisions regarding EU youth policy, based on the scope of their authority and responsibilities, the aim of the governance model was that the actors should coordinate among themselves, working together and consulting with each other as and when necessary. In order to organise such a governance model, a joint working group between the youth ministries of the Federal Government and the Länder (Federal-Länder-Working Group) coordinated the implementation. An Advisory Board, consisting of representatives from the municipalities and civil society (i.e. from nontatutory child and youth services providers, youth organisations and academia) advised the Federal Ministry on the implementation. Both committees, set up within the context of the EU Youth Strategy implementation process in Germany, were consequently the first institutionalised forms of cooperation between the federal levels in Germany for the purpose of coordination and participatory consultations on European youth policy (Baumbast, Hofmann-van de Poll, and Rink 2015). With the end of the EU Youth Strategy 2010-2018, the two committees were dissolved and (partly) integrated into committees on national youth policy.

Instead of implementing all eight fields of action of the EU Youth Strategy (Council of the European Union 2009), three priorities were set in Germany: participation, non-formal education and transitions (Baumbast, Hofmann-van de Poll, and Rink 2015). These three topics formed the basis for the impulses that were to be brought from Germany to the European level. At the same time, cross-thematic discussions and impulses were set for

the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2013; European Commission 2017), as well as the development of a new EU youth strategy (Council of the European Union 2018).

DOMESTIC COORDINATION OF EU YOUTH POLICY IN GERMANY

Against this background, the domestic coordination of EU policies in Germany follows specific rules and regulations, which focus on cooperation between the Federal Government and the Länder. This cooperation is regulated in the Act on Cooperation between the Federation and the Länder in European Union Affairs (German Bundestag 1993). This focus on cooperation between the Federal Government and the Länder, and to a certain extent also NGOs, was the primary focus of the interviewees when asked about cooperation mechanisms. This is interesting, as based on the description of the coordination process above, one would expect the Permanent Representation to play a role in the youth policy coordination process as well. However, the interviewees ascribe to it an executive role as an extended arm of the BMFSFJ and hardly perceive the Permanent Representation as an independent actor (1586_7; 1823_56). This could be due to the fact that the Permanent Representation did not have an independent youth department for a long time. Nevertheless, the role or the non-role of the Permanent Representation in the coordination process would be interesting to pursue further, also in contrast to the existing research on the Permanent Representation (e.g. Maurer and Wessels 2001).

Within these regulations, there is room for interpretation of the coordination process by the involved actors. Our data show that in the context of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and bottom-up Europeanisation, the Federal Government, the Länder and NGOs (i.e. non-statutory child and youth services providers and youth organisations) have different expectations when it comes to the question as to how an official German position is or can be best achieved. With a focus on successful European negotiations, the Federal Government takes on a hierarchical role of a gatekeeper, sorting and filtering the interests of domestic actors to achieve a consensual German position. In contrast, the Länder and NGOs assume that the coordination process – and not only the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany – is based on a multi-level governance approach, accompanied by a certain amount of equality between the actors. These expectations and the resulting action strategies cause coordinating problems in the German coordination process. Two coordinating problems stand out. These are the different perceptions and expectations of the coordination process and the lack of a culture of debate that should underlie the coordination process. These problems as well as approaches toward their resolution will be discussed in the following two sections.

Problem 1: Contrasting Perceptions and Expectations

Our data show that the German Federal Government at the one side and the Länder and NGOs at the other side have different perceptions and expectations of the German EU youth policy coordination process.

The German Federal Government pursues a certain objective in the domestic coordination process of EU policies. Its goal is to negotiate with other EU member states in the Youth Working Party and reach a consensus, preferably based on as much German impulses as possible. From experience, the Federal Government knows that individual concerns of member states, especially ones that are of relevance to the specific situation within a member state, do not get heard in EU negotiations. Interview data show that prior to the establishment of an official German position, the BMFSFJ therefore consults with other member states about consistencies in positions. One example in particular, where Germany coordinated its position with other member states, was the design of the Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes (1580_71). In the negotiations on the European Solidarity Corps, for example, Germany advocated very early on in discussions with other

member states that the participating countries should not be limited to EU member states but should be expanded beyond them (1586_106). Eventually, such European coordination ensures that the position can be transposed into domestic policies by other member states and is consequently of interest to them. At the same time, the BMFSFJ assumes that after a domestic consultation process in Germany, the official German position should be based on this domestic consensus, guaranteeing (domestic) transparency. Establishing a German position thus includes coordination both at the European and at the national level.

In order to deal with both European and domestic coordination, the Federal Government follows a policy of selectivity. This policy is based on the assumption that Länder and NGOs pursue their own interests and issues, which are not necessarily important to other member states. With European coordination in mind, the Federal Government therefore only selects such domestic interests for an official German position if it expects them to be successful in European negotiations. Only limited reference is made to the non-consensual positions of the Länder and NGOs, resulting in these being only incidentally visible to European actors (1580_8-9; 1580_11; 1580_44-45; 1324_27). The Federal Government thus takes on the role of a gatekeeper, responsible for ordering and filtering interests (cf. Shoemaker and Vos 2009, 13f., 21). It acts as mediator between the domestic and European level, reconciling contradictory interests in order to build one common position and forge a consensus. It controls the flow of policy information to contain the ability of opposing actors to veto their political initiatives (cf. Eising 2004, 218; 2016, 192).

On the other hand, various NGOs and Länder assume that, due to the multi-level governance approach defining the implementation process of the EU Youth Strategy, the coordination of an official domestic position takes place on an equal footing at all stages. They are therefore irritated by the behaviour of the Federal Government and under the impression that the BMFSFJ interprets its competences within the scope of the official process to mean that it decides which national positions form the official German position (1762_34- 35; 1580_44-45; 1762_59-63; 1823_78-79; 1762_46-49). The BMFSFJ is perceived as an
actor who ignores equal cooperation in accordance with the multi-level governance approach and selectively decides, according to its own interests, which domestic interests find their way to the European level.

This being said, Länder and NGOs recount that at the European level they do not feel sufficiently acknowledged or represented by the Federal Government and, in part, also not sufficiently supported in their work, sometimes even feeling obstructed (1762_59-61; 1808_110-111). In conjunction with this perception, they see the official coordination process as being fraught with difficulties. Thus, they typically submit their interests and impulses to the European debate separately, operating as individual actors with own opinions in their dealings with European actors in general and the European Commission in particular (1762_31; 1762_135). To do so, the Länder use their own representations in Brussels (Moore 2006), whereas NGOs turn either to their representations in Brussels – if they have one – or use their national organisations. Metaphorically speaking, the Länder and NGOs use alternative side roads to achieve their goal of communicating their interests on the European stage and by-passing the apparent information-blockages by the Federal Government. They look for alternative forms of communicating information in order to spark new impulses and present their interests to the EU. One such way is extensive bilateral lobbying with EU institutions as a way of exchanging opinions and ideas with other stakeholders on the European stage (1324_29; 1741_126; also cf. Callanan 2011, 17; Eising 2016, 192). Others include regularly organised lunch talks between German representatives active in EU youth policy as well as the organisation of youth policy related events. For youth organisations and young people, the Structured Dialogue (now EU Youth Dialogue) is also an opportunity to introduce thematic impulses, as they cannot get directly involved in negotiations. Examples are the topics of digitalisation and young refugees (1586_40).

Summarising the above observations taken from the data, different German actors use different pathways to bring their interests into EU negotiations. The Federal Government strictly adheres to the official path and seeks consensus with other member states in order to have its point of view heard. The Länder and NGOs also use other paths to give force to their arguments. This happens especially when their interests and arguments are not taken up in the official position. This leads to three different scenarios under which German interests are presented at the European level.

First, situations in which the Federal Government, the Länder and NGOs do not agree on German interests. The federal position that is brought to the negotiating table may be weakened under certain circumstances because other actors are using alternative pathways to feed contrary interests into the negotiations. Alternatively, Länder and civil society can use alternative pathways to bring issues on the European agenda that are not considered to be important by the Federal Government. An example of such an issue where Länder in particular are engaging bilaterally with EU institutions and regional partners to get the issue on the agenda, is youth homelessness (1823_114).

Second, situations in which the actors agree in principle on German interests, but the Federal Government decides to introduce a moderate negotiating position as a result of informal talks with other member states, while the Länder and NGOs try to feed their interests into the negotiations through alternative pathways. In this situation the actors pursue a common strategy through two different pathways, pursuing the same goal with more or less moderate positions. An example of this scenario is the German plea for a holistic approach to youth policy, including the importance of participation and non-formal learning for young people's development. This also includes the vision that young people need spaces and freedoms to develop themselves and try things out. According to the interviewees, it was questionable to what extent other member states were interested in such an approach due to their domestic structural conditions. Whereas the Federal Government formulated a more reserved position, this issue was very strongly advocated by NGOs (1564_34).

Third, situations in which the actors can agree on the German position and pursue it through both official and alternative pathways. This was the case in 2015, when the Federal Government and the Länder worked together to ensure that the situation of young refugees is included in the EU work programme (318_215). In general, EU institutions reported that the German voice is both unified and loud when it comes to issues such as values (democracy and diversity, the fight against racism and extremism) and mobility (1324_74; 1564_74).

The dissatisfaction of the actors with the domestic coordination process and the different resulting pathways of bringing their positions to EU level are also due to a tension between the inclusive approach of multi-level governance and the political responsibilities that come with federalism. It seems that the difference between European and domestic regulations may disturb the complex inner state system of checks and balances. This tension may further increase by the peculiarities of youth policy. In the present case, the policy aiming at adopting a multi-level governance approach across all European, national and subnational levels found itself confronted by the federalist division of powers, including the role of the Federal Government as the political actor representing Germany in its relations with the EU. This results in a situation in which the Federal Government exercises greater (European) political authority than other governmental actors (such as the Länder). The Federal Government represents Germany (in terms of youth policy) at the EU level while the Länder have an advisory role and are part of the German delegation during the official negotiations within the Youth Working Party. However, they depend on the goodwill of the Federal Government for information and documents concerning the Youth Working Party (1823_33). NGOs are not included in this official distribution of roles.

At the same time, youth policy in Germany is a field in which the Länder, the local level

and NGOs have a wide scope of action and design which is regulated by law. These different responsibilities "clash" with each other to a certain extent. In particular, the Länder, which are very active in implementing the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, are also very active in the European youth policy field and try to exert influence on EU institutions through their offices in Brussels (Moore 2006).

The difference between European and national responsibilities may even be the cause of some of the problems because the complex system of checks and balances within the country, involving a carefully balanced division of responsibilities and decision-making powers, can be thrown off balance due to actions at the EU level. Within this system of checks and balances, the Federal Government is able to operate relatively autonomously in its dealings with the EU. In other words, it does not explicitly have to ask the Länder and municipalities or NGOs about their interests and, operating in this way, it wields considerable influence in the EU. On the other hand, the Länder and NGOs are much more limited in terms of the amount of autonomy they have and it is not clear to what extent their actions (i.e. using alternative pathways) have an effect at the European level. Incorporating additional pathways as a part of German bottom-up Europeanisation may be a way to restore the complex inner state system of checks and balances. In fact, there is some evidence that the Federal Government is not only aware of these alternative paths, but also actively supports them (Advisory Board 2017). The Federal Government actively supports alternative pathways particularly then, when it agrees to the interests of domestic actors but considers them to be nonviable in European negotiations because of other member states' positions.

Problem 2: A Lacking Culture of Debate

The second coordination problem that could be identified in the data is related to communication structures in the domestic coordination process. The different perceptions and assumptions underlying the domestic coordination process - in particular the multi-level governance approach and the subsidiarity principle - lead to forms of communication becoming the focus of observation. The lack of a culture of debate within the framework of German EU youth policy is identified by the Länder and NGOs as a reason for their dissatisfaction with the coordination process.

In line with the German implementation of the EU Youth Strategy and the assigned responsibilities towards the BMFSFJ within this process, Länder and NGOs expect that such joint debates, organised by the Federal Government, form an integral part of the domestic consultation process (1823_189-193). They criticise that although certain structures to promote coordination and the exchange of ideas and opinions were established with the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, it nevertheless appears that a culture of collective debate is missing between the Federal Government and domestic stakeholders. It is suggested that the principle of subsidiarity stands in the way of a joint debate and that the multi-level governance coordination currently in place is not an adequate substitute (1823_61).

When asked for the reasons for this lack of a culture of debate despite the structures being in place, several different insights were given by the interviewees. Different national actors sit on different committees set up within the framework of the implementation process of the EU Youth Strategy, and information shared in one particular committee is not necessarily made available to all other stakeholders or actors at the other levels. This practice of selective information provision creates closed information loops. Furthermore, the information formats chosen for the committee work, including written questionnaires and oral reports, are considered inappropriate because they prevent the individual stakeholders from engaging in active dialogues (1741_126; 1762_53). These circumstances ultimately lead to a lack of information and understanding, and sometimes even to passivity among the committee members. An attempt to counteract these problems by actively ensuring that all information was shared met with only limited success (Hofmann-van de Poll and Pelzer 2019). As a consequence, the individual actors

at the different levels do not have the necessary information about the topics debated at the other levels which, in turn, means that there is no basis for reciprocal discussions, making the establishment of a common position through open consultation all the more difficult.

Moreover, the Länder and NGOs feel pressured by the way the Federal Government understands their role in the coordination process. In their eyes, the Federal Government expects them to have a fixed position right at the beginning of a consultation process, rather than being able to develop their positions for national consultation after having the opportunity to exchange information with other domestic stakeholders. Such fixed positions dramatically slow down and even obstruct the exchange of ideas, perceptions and opinions in the national context. According to the Länder and NGOs, the Federal Government lacks the procedural flexibility to organise a consultation process more directed towards cooperation and exchange (1762_46-49/53; 1823_60-61). At the same time, the Federal Government points to the lack of engagement shown by the Länder and NGOs in the committees implementing the EU Youth Strategy in Germany.

Summarising these perceptions of the actors, the formalisation of the implementation and coordination processes seems to be a major problem. A culture of debate is lacking due to limited access to the work of the Federal-Länder-Working Group and the Advisory Board, resulting in closed information loops, and further aggravated by unsuitable information formats. Because of these formalised structures and strict rules, the structures do not allow for much latitude regarding other forms of communication. A constructive exchange of ideas and opinions among domestic actors is prevented, as individual pieces of information go missing or are only shared with specific actors. Both groups of actors (the Federal Government and the Länder/NGOs) identify specific characteristics of this formalisation as a problem. However, rather than associating the non-existent culture of debate with overformalised structures, they consider their perception of a non-existent culture of debate within the domestic consultation process as being subjective. It thus seems that the higher the degree of formalisation within the communication structures, the less effective domestic cooperation is.

One way of solving this problem would be to ensure that the network interconnecting the Federal Government, Länder and NGOs is as strong as possible. Here, the term network refers not only to the exchange of ideas and opinions on specific topics between the stakeholders, but also and more importantly to their participation, on an equal footing, in intensive consultations. These consultations should aim at both determining which topics can be successfully incorporated into an official German position – bearing in mind the consensus politics of the Council of the EU – and which pathways of communication and information in the EU can be used to ensure that the agreed-on positions are clearly communicated as the joint German position by all domestic actors operating at the European level. According to the interviewees, a stronger coordinating network would ensure transparency and promotion. Transparency in terms of the process of deciding which of the national impulses are channelled into the official German position becoming more transparent for all the domestic stakeholders, where at the same time giving them a say in the process. Promotion in the sense that the position, having been agreed on by all the actors within this strong network, can subsequently be promoted via the pathways of communication of all the German stakeholders in Brussels - and not only via the Federal Government.

In order to strengthen such a network, suitable platforms for the exchange of ideas, experiences and opinions are a prerequisite. Such platforms should be characterised by the fact that they ensure, by means of free access regulations, regular cycles and suitable communication formats, both the participation and inclusion of all the actors involved in the process of developing and implementing the EU Youth Strategy, thus contributing to a constructive culture of debate and paving the way for joint consultations. In addition, measures must be taken to ensure that the information that is acquired at the European level and is to be distributed within Germany is not only shared with individual

stakeholders, but is made available to each and every one of the actors involved.

CONCLUSION

With the Federal Republic of Germany as an example, the present article provides an insight into circumstances under which domestic actors circumvent the Federal Government and the country's official position in order to promote their interests through lobbying in the EU. At the same time, the study also shows how the Federal Government organises itself, and in some circumstances relies on domestic actors, to pursue its interests in Brussels. It shows that the policy coordination in German EU youth policy resulting from this interplay is highly complex. Two main causes of complexity were analysed here.

First, the complexity is increased by the role of NGOs. While in German youth policy the role of non-statutory child and youth services providers and youth organisations is legally defined, official German EU policy coordination only regulates the cooperation between the federal and state governments by law. At the same time however, NGOs are a strong force in EU youth politics, advocating their own interests at EU institutions - sometimes even with own representations in Brussels. The procedural ambiguity that results from this constellation leads to the second point of complexity.

Due to the domestic circumstances of youth policy and the multi-level governance approach established during the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy on the one hand, and the rules and distribution of competences stipulated by the European processes on the other hand, different perceptions and expectations for the domestic cooperation process arise among the actors. These different perceptions and expectations increase the complexity of the cooperation process and lead to different pathways that actors use to pursue their interests in Brussels.

Both reasons for the complexity can be found causally in the circumstances of German and European youth policy. Nevertheless, lessons for German policy coordination in general can be drawn from the consequences of this complexity. These lessons come into play in particular when, in addition to the official cooperation between the federal and Länder governments, other actors also appear as stakeholders in a policy field. It is then necessary for all those involved, but especially for the Federal Government in its gatekeeper function, to establish a certain transparency among themselves as to how positions arise and which positions are brought to the European level, why and how. Such transparency could lead to a mutual strengthening of positions and thus to a strengthening of the officially represented position of Germany. However, it remains to be examined whether this conclusion would apply equally to soft law and hard law policy areas. The important role of NGOs as stakeholders, especially at the European level, is not least due to the fact that youth policy is a soft law policy field that essentially depends on the cooperation of relevant actors.

Looking at bottom-up Europeanisation in general, our findings show that the functioning of traditional modes of governance in European policy-making, in which governments mirror the national position at the European level, highly depends on national political frameworks (such as federalism) and the national and European framework of the policy field (here youth policy). A strong and inclusive coordination process can strengthen national position at EU negotiations. This requires that actors leave traditional modes of governance and are open to new forms of cooperation. Actors can use their presence and contacts in Brussels to introduce a previously agreed national position also outside the negotiations in the Council, thus getting a feeling regarding which actors from other member states could be potential supporters of their position. By using different pathways of communication and influence, interests can be brought in more strongly. The interaction between these pathways opens up new possibilities of bottom-up Europeanisation, the interplay of which has hardly been explored so far. For

Europeanisation research, it would therefore be interesting to look beyond the generally known forms of policy coordination (Kassim et al. 2001; e.g. Kassim, Peters, and Wright 2000) and expand research on the interplay between official and alternative pathways, such as lobbying of NGOs at European institutions, the use of organising conferences and informal meetings for agenda-setting etc.

Another question raised by these findings relates to how the framework conditions of an EU policy field influence actor constellations and thus domestic coordination processes. With regard to federal states, our study shows that depending on how the framework conditions of an EU policy field are designed, adjustments to the national framework conditions in federal states could be necessary. These adjustments should be directed towards participation and cooperation specifically, and the framework conditions in the national context should be expanded, if necessary, so that actors are involved on an equal footing. However, these adjustments should be clearly outspoken and not be based on unspoken assumptions. Our findings show that such adjustments can on the one hand consist of the establishment of exchange platforms and a discussion about their composition. The flow of in- formation also plays a role here in order to create transparency. On the other hand, the ways in the EU can be used more intensively by discussing which pathways are used by whom in order to strengthen national interests at EU level. Such adjustments may reduce the potential for domestic conflict and make coordination more productive. It would be interesting for further research to explore the question of the mutual influence of EU policy field framework conditions and domestic coordination processes. At least for soft law policy, there seems to be such a fluidity.

Multi-level governance requires the cooperation of different levels and state and non-state actors. Against this background, this article has focused more strongly on the role of NGOs in the structure of federal-Länder cooperation in a soft law policy field. However, it is apparent that some of the problems that have come to the fore in this cooperation can be traced back to the different perceptions and expectations of the involved actors. In this sense, it would be interesting to take a closer look at such cooperation structures in other states and policy fields as well. This article is intended as a first contribution to this research.

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Frederike Hofmann-van de Poll, Centre for European Youth Policy at the German Youth Institute, Nockherstrasse 2, 81541 Munich, Germany. [fhofmann@dji.de]

Daniela Keilberth, Munich, Germany. [daniela.keilberth@gmail.com]

ENDNOTES

[1] 1762_35 refers to line 35 in interview nr. 1762. All interviews have been assigned random numbers to maintain anonymity.

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