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Doing Europe: Local Governments as Agents of European Cohesion

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Abstract

Academia and practitioners agree that the local level is crucial for EU cohesion. However, further conceptual and empirical development is needed. The paper introduces an understanding of European cohesion consisting of a horizontal and a vertical dimension, covering individuals' relationships with each other and the polity. We review the predominantly nation-state-focused, interdisciplinary literature on support for the European Union (vertical dimension) and societal Europeanization (horizontal dimension) through a 'local lens', arguing in favour of combining the two dimensions in one framework of cohesion. We derive empirical expectations about the role of local agency for European cohesion and operationalise European cohesion, thus designing a coherent framework for analysing the local foundations of European cohesion.

Introduction

Cohesion is increasingly in the focus of public and academic attention. Often, talk about cohesion is motivated by a perceived lack of it. In Europe, the erosion of the so-called ‘permissive consensus’ and the rise of Euroscepticism can be debated in terms of internal cohesion. Recent crises like the Euro crisis, the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ and the Covid 19-pandemic have further fuelled discussion about economic and social cohesion, problematising polarisation and increasing structural imbalances in Europe. At the same time, these crises have also contributed to strengthening Eurosceptic sentiments among the citizens (Hobolt and Tilley 2016). In this paper, we will argue that cities are of paramount importance in addressing these perceived deficiencies in cohesion both *of* Europe and *in* Europe.

Politically, the local level is coined as the ‘school of democracy’ and as closest to citizens (Tausendpfund 2013). In (European) political science, this role of the local level and the related thesis of cities as places of cohesion are sometimes referred to (Brandsen *et al.* 2016; Braun and Tausendpfund 2017), but overall the local level receives relatively little interest from political scientists. This is particularly surprising when viewed in conjunction with the regular results of surveys of citizens and voters on the importance of the local level. European citizens trust the local (and regional) levels more than other levels (European Commission 2021). Societally, it is a space for community building. Cities are characterized by an independent logic of *Vergesellschaftung* (socialization) (Löw 2010: 150). The academic assumptions about the importance of the local level are as well shared by political actors as the Pact of Amsterdam illustrates:

‘[...] Urban Authorities play a crucial role in the daily life of all EU citizens. Urban Authorities are often the level of government closest to the citizens. The success of European sustainable urban development is highly important for the economic, social and territorial cohesion of the European Union and the quality of life of its citizens’ (EU Ministers for Urban Matters 2016)

While the Pact was the outcome of an informal ministers’ meeting, it still constitutes a cornerstone of EU urban policy. It expresses the political idea of the local, notably the urban, as a source of cohesion of a complex multi-level system. The European Commission, although it has no formal competences for urban matters, has been stressing the importance of cities for the EU for a long time (Cotella 2019; Frantz 2021; Atkinson and Zimmermann 2016).

Still, the scientific debate has largely focused on national differences when analysing European cohesion, not least because sample sizes, for example of the Eurobarometer, do not allow disaggregating findings on the level of cities. Additionally, explanations of different levels of cohesion rely primarily on structural factors (like economic structures, city size or citizens’ educational level). But whether and how local agency can shape cohesion remains largely unexplored. This paper pursues a conceptual claim. It develops a framework for investigating the effects of local agency on European cohesion as an analytical foundation for further empirical research.

In a first step, we introduce an understanding of cohesion consisting of two dimensions focusing on citizens’ relationships with the polity (vertical dimension) and each other (horizontal dimension). Second, we review the state of research through a local, predominantly urban ‘lens’. Third, we systematically develop assumptions from the literature about what may influence European cohesion locally: activities and discourse. Finally, we introduce empirical expectations about the role of the local for European cohesion and suggest an operationalisation of European cohesion.

European Cohesion as a Two-Dimensional Concept

In the European Union, the concept of cohesion has a long political tradition. It is closely linked to policies and funding schemes that aim to limit economic, social and territorial disparities (see Art. 174 TFEU). Thus, in European political practice, it is thought of rather in socio-economic than in political terms. Cohesion was put on the European agenda when the capacities of inclusion through the welfare state eroded and was mainly thought of in terms of its economic functionality (Novy *et al.* 2012). Cohesion is discussed as a counterpart to various crises of liberal democracy, ranging from polarization and populism, erosion of trust to inequality (Deitelhoff *et al.* 2020: 10) and can be regarded as a ‘defensive strategy’ (Maloutas and Pantelidou Malouta 2004). Thus, cohesion is seen as a resource for pacifying conflict and ‘allowing for respectful communal conduct between heterogeneous groups’ (Scheurer and Haase 2018). However, some argue that this focus on cohesion glosses over the productive force of conflict in voicing and mediating interests (Eizaguirre *et al.* 2012) and thus serves to depoliticize legitimate conflicts.

In academic literature, many mourn both the conceptual ambiguity of ‘cohesion’ as well as the political and normative charge (Chan *et al.* 2006). Deitelhoff *et al.* describe cohesion as an ‘empty signifier’ that is ‘open to a variety of sometimes diametrically opposed conceptions’ ranging from ethnic homogeneity to post-national solidarity (2020: 13, own translation). Its core, however, consists of a ‘positive relationship of some kind among members *to each other* and *to their community*’ (Deitelhoff *et al.* 2020: 13, own translation, emphasis added).

Table 1: Cohesion’s Horizontal and Vertical Dimensions

	Attitudes	Behaviour
Horizontal Dimension	Attitudes towards fellow citizens	Societal participation (e.g. donations, volunteering)
Vertical Dimension	Attitudes towards political institutions and public officials	Political participation

Adapted representation based on the two-by-two framework by Chan *et al.* (2006).

We follow Chan *et al.* (2006) who devise a conception of cohesion that focuses on exactly these horizontal and vertical relationships (see table 1) and apply it to the European context. The horizontal dimension focuses on socialisation, relationships and mutual trust between citizens. The vertical dimension encompasses individuals’ connections to the polity. Like Chan *et al.* (2006), we furthermore distinguish between attitudes and behaviour¹. This approach uses the individual perspective as a gateway to determining cohesion at the local societal level. It stresses cohesion as a political concept in distinction to the notion of cohesion employed in European Cohesion Policy, a notion that primarily focuses on socio-economic aspects.

State of Research – European Union Cohesion at the Local Level

Based on this two-dimensional definition of cohesion, we argue in favour of systematically linking the relatively distinct academic debates on support for the EU in the framework of political science with the issues

¹ Chan *et al.* term this subjective and objective component (2006).

of societal Europeanization and of cohesion in cities. We review the state of research to develop systematic expectations about the local foundations of cohesion in the EU.

The Vertical Dimension: Local EU Support

Most literature that analyses support for the EU takes nation-states as their unit of investigation. Consequently, differences between the single EU Member States can be identified (Sánchez-Cuenca 2000; Díez Medrano 2003; Frazer and Van Ingelgom 2013). Seldom there is a territorial dimension, and if there is, it is regional, not local (López-Bazo 2021; Gross and Debus 2018; e.g. Díez Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001). This body of research relying on analyses of survey data like the Eurobarometer investigates how prevalent support² for the EU is, and what factors favour or hinder it. Utilitarian concerns are shown to be central for the explanation of the level of support. This perspective discusses benefits both for the individual and its nation-state (e.g. Gabel 1998: 350; Sanders *et al.* 2012a: 209)³. In addition, identity-related explanations for support focus on whether pre-existing identifications (national or regional) are compatible with a European one or not (McLaren 2002, 2004; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Díez Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001). Other works point out the role of so-called ‘cues’, meaning heuristics or prompts individuals rely on to make assessments about political issues (Pannico 2017; Sanders *et al.* 2012b). Furthermore, individual characteristics like socio-demographic features, knowledge or individual experiences are also linked to EU support (Kuhn 2011; Clark and Hellwig 2012; Karp *et al.* 2003).

Although utilitarian concerns are arguably most important, EU support thus is influenced by a larger set of variables. Also, there is ambivalence and indifference in practice (Van Ingelgom 2014). Qualitative research on support has contributed to identifying this ambivalence as well as tracing individual processes of meaning-making (Gaxie *et al.* 2011; Duchesne *et al.* 2013; Van Ingelgom 2014; Díez Medrano 2003; Hurrelmann *et al.* 2015).

Most of these findings are situated at the level of nation-states. Nevertheless there are a few explicit findings on local EU support. Tausendpfund (2013) shows that support for European integration varies considerably between cities, explaining this with individual-level factors and to some extent with city partnerships and the integration of foreigners. Others find a size effect: Large cities’ inhabitants tend to be more EU-supportive (Royuela 2020) than their surroundings, creating a distinct ‘geography of discontent’ (Dijkstra *et al.* 2020: 744)⁴. In a study of intra-European movers, so-called ‘Eurostars’, Favell shows that the local opportunity structures have an impact on citizens’ participation and feeling of belonging (Favell 2010). This also reflects in varying political participation, as the local turnout in European Parliament elections shows (Linderborg 2019). However, little is known about the reasons for this variation beyond inconclusive findings, for example, on the role of European funding for turnout (cf. Mattila 2003; Fiorino *et al.* 2019). Thus, local political participation in European politics deserves further investigation. Also, the extent of the Europeanization of

² Support for the EU often is measured by individuals’ opinions about their country’s EU membership (e.g. Gabel 1998), integration in general (e.g. Clark and Hellwig 2012) or concerning policy fields (e.g. Hooghe 2003). Other measures include the satisfaction with or trust in institutions or EU democracy (e.g. McEvoy 2016) or identification with the EU (e.g. Díez Medrano and Gutiérrez 2001; Polyakova and Fligstein 2016). Finally, there are several studies that combine different measures (e.g. McLaren 2002; Garry and Tilley 2009) or create indices (e.g. Levy and Phan 2014).

³ There is a debate on how to measure utilitarianism. While some use macro-economic indicators (De Vries and Van Kersbergen 2007), others use respondents’ perceptions of their benefits (Mau 2005; Levy and Phan 2014; Dijkstra *et al.* 2020).

⁴ Most likely, size is a proxy for opportunity structures and transnationalization.

local politics (like local elections, local party manifestos etc.) is largely unexplored. Recent undertakings like the Local Manifesto Project will enable such research in the future (see Gross and Jankowski 2020).

In addition to these findings that are specific for the local level, we can derive expectations about local manifestations of cohesion from the general literature on support. Knowing that utilitarian concerns are among the central drivers of EU support, we can expect local cohesion to vary with a city's economic structure and its dependence on EU funds. Furthermore, the local socio-economic structure could have an impact given that people with higher formal education or high-skilled jobs are more supportive of the EU since they tend to profit more from it (McLaren 2004). Thus, differences between the levels of EU support across cities may be explained by these structural factors. However, to what extent EU-support is susceptible to changes through local agency is so far unknown.

The Horizontal Dimension: Europeanized Local Societies

Analyses of socialization processes in Europe, too, usually take national societies as their unit of investigation. There are internal differentiations by socio-demographic and -economic factors, but rarely spatial or sub-national ones. This sociological strand of research phrases the question of European cohesion in terms of interpersonal relationships and the existence or development of a European society. It asks whether citizens feel connected to a polity's other members, be they individuals or other countries' peoples (Recchi *et al.* 2019; Lahusen 2019). Like in Chan *et al.*'s definition, this includes both attitudes (feelings of closeness etc.) and behaviour (e.g. their transnational behaviour in travelling or personal networks). While issues of the relationship of people within Europe to each other can be described as societal Europeanization, other concepts take up these issues as well. For instance, the academic discourse on a European identity also revolves around relational questions. Here, too, the importance of 'bottom-up processes that involve education, socialization, political conflict, and social interaction' to develop a European identity has been pointed out (Fligstein 2008: 126, see for example also Bellamy and Castiglione 2008).

In general, one can observe a certain level of societal Europeanization, although there are limits and national differences, too. Attitudinally, Europeans tend to feel more familiar to other European peoples than peoples outside Europe, although there are distinct country patterns shaped either by proximity or connections of labour migration (Savage *et al.* 2019). To some extent, individuals perceive other European peoples to be a point of reference for their own lives (Lahusen and Kiess 2019). There is a certain level of European solidarity as the willingness to give something to others (money, help) without any returns (Gerhards *et al.* 2021), although solidarity varies in intensity depending on a perception of the recipients' deservingness (Díez Medrano *et al.* 2019). Behaviorally, Europeans are 'astonishingly mobile' (Salamońska and Recchi 2019). Intra-EU mobility, as Recchi shows, is a strong predictor of attachment to Europe (Recchi 2017) and therefore is linked to the vertical dimension of cohesion.

Those findings, although gained, again, at the national level, may also provide expectations about cities. For example, the Europeanization of local society may depend on the transnationalization of the local economy, geographic position and proximity to other European countries as well as the composition of the local population (e.g. the number of European migrants, the existence of a university or transnational company). Also, we may expect differences in the development of a form of Europeanized society depending on the local opportunity structure for transnational exchange. For example, cities that are close to borders or are actively engaged in town twinning produce more occasions for exchange that is, based on transactionalist thinking (Salamońska and Recchi 2019), expected to foster the Europeanization of societies. Still, these expectations need to be taken with a grain of salt. Whether individuals behave transnationally is 'highly stratified along educational attainment, age and occupational background' (Kuhn 2011: 828), and does not automatically

produce Europeanness in individuals (Damay and Mercenier 2016; Favell 2010; Pötzschke and Braun 2019). These ambivalent findings on the concrete effect of transnationalism (mobility and other contacts) substantiate our interest in a more fine-grained analysis that investigates differences between cities.

In Urban Studies, there has been broad research on cohesion in cities, although without a specific focus on Europe. Their findings can inform an analysis of European cohesion in cities. These studies often share an interest in how differences (social plurality and economic inequality) affect local cohesion and how factors like welfare (Andreotti *et al.* 2012), the labour market (Pratschke and Morlicchio 2012) or (spatial) segregation (Cassiers and Kesteloot 2012) impact local cohesion. The spatiality of cohesion is stressed and with it the possibility of tensions between objectives of cohesion depending on the scale we look at (Kearns and Forrest 2000). The internal cohesion of neighbourhoods may not be the same as city-wide cohesion, since tight-knit communities may conflict with one another (see for example Oxendine 2016 on 'bridging' and 'bonding social capital'). Increasing cohesion *within* a neighbourhood thus may result in less cohesion *between* neighbourhoods (for a critical account of the types of social capital and their local role, see Blokland and Savage 2008). This connects to the debates about in- and exclusivity of identities in Europe and stresses the importance of local experiences and practices.

Thus, the literature on societal Europeanization has investigated both attitudes (feelings of closeness, familiarity, Europeanness, trust) and behaviour (transnational personal networks, physical and virtual mobility, solidarity-focussed action). And there is a body of literature on urban cohesion, but these are rarely linked. How European cohesion manifests in cities requires further analysis.

Local Agency and Cohesion in Europe

There is ample reason to believe in a central role of the local for European cohesion, both theoretically and empirically. However, some of the factors that have been shown to influence European cohesion can be classified as structural ones, for example, the characteristics of the local economy and the resulting socio-economic position of the local population. While it is important to acknowledge such structural factors as the framework within which cohesion develops (or not), we will in the following focus on those aspects that are susceptible to local agency.

Local authorities are outstanding stakeholders of interest in the EU due to their position as an important implementation level of national and European legislation and as the frontline level for most issues for European citizens. Against this background, they perform numerous Europe-related activities. We propose to distinguish four types of Europe-related activities: uploading, downloading, networking and communication⁵. *Uploading* includes, for instance, activity in umbrella organisations like the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) or EUROCITIES aimed at representing interests at the European level. *Downloading* comprises activities in implementation and the use of EU funding. *Networking* refers to, for example, town twinning. And *communication* includes the systematic information of citizens on the cities' European activities, framing and discourse on European issues. However, the level of activity varies significantly between cities (Verhelst 2017).

We argue that Europe-related activities by collective actors – be they local authorities or civil society organisations – can be expected to affect the local population's attitudes and behaviours regarding other Europeans and the European polity, thus the local manifestation of European cohesion. Drawing on the

⁵ These types of activities may overlap in political practice. For example, participation in organisations like EUROCITIES may fulfil functions of networking as well as uploading.

literature on cohesion in general, we discuss where to expect such impacts. In the following, we investigate two aspects of local agency. First, we look into horizontal and vertical activities in the European multi-level system. This includes those activities which might be described as up- and downloading and networking (Marshall 2005; Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Hamedinger and Wolffhardt 2010). Second, we analyse the communicative activities. This part discusses how local discourse and strategic framing impact cohesion and incorporates the fourth type of activity what can be called ‘dissemination’.

Horizontal and Vertical Local Activity

First of all, local authorities can take on the role of actors in the European Multi-Level system. Vertical activities connect cities to the European level. Their *uploading* activities aim at feeding their interests into the European political process (see Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008). This depends on local agency and a city’s strategic interest in uploading (Huggins 2018). Effective uploading, we argue, can be a source of a feeling of efficacy for local citizens. Efficacy as ‘a person’s belief that governing institutions are responsive to their interests’ has been shown to be a ‘key predictor of public opinion towards the European Union’ (McEvoy 2016). Inclusive decision-making processes on European matters within a city may influence people’s attitudes and behaviour. It has been shown that local opportunity structures for participation matter (Favell 2010)⁶ as does the inclusion of civil society and non-profit organisations in decision-making processes (Potluka and Špaček 2019) and a bottom-up organisation of participation that is not subordinated to pre-determined administrative goals (Boonstra and Boelens 2011).

Second, there are *downloading* activities. Given that local government implements European legal acts, this may be local authorities’ quantitatively most extensive Europe-related activity. Compliance research has shown that there is considerable variation in local implementation of European legislation, stressing that the local level has noticeable leeway in dealing with EU law (e.g. Bondarouk *et al.* 2020). Additionally, downloading experiences can inform uploading activities. The use of European subsidies also allows local activity. Existing research shows that European funding has impacts on attitudes towards the EU (Borz *et al.* 2018), at least if it is used effectively and quickly (López-Bazo 2021) or has a positive impact on the labour market (Crescenzi *et al.* 2020). Citizens wish to be included in decision-making about the use of funding (Pegan *et al.* 2018). Where local authorities are creative in framing or redefining their own needs so that they can be met by European funds (Mukhtar-Landgren and Fred 2019; Pflieger 2014), such effects may be tapped into. However, this presupposes that local authorities have the will and the prerequisites for using funding. In concrete terms, this means expertise on funding schemes, personnel and administrative capacities for acquisition and the availability of financial means for co-financing. Moreover, funding schemes have different eligibility. Therefore, using European funding also depends on non-state actors ranging from local businesses to civil society organisations.

Third, there are horizontal *networking* activities like participation in Euro-Regions, town twinning, or membership in associations (like Eurocities, CEMR). These constitute a basis not just for uploading activities within European umbrella organisations but also for horizontal processes of socialization. But as shown by Tausendpfund and Schäfer (2018), a city’s activities in town twinning alone does not affect support. Instead, its effect depends on citizens’ active involvement with twinning. Again, this illustrates the importance of extending the perspective not just on local authorities, but also on local civil society as well. While local authorities may provide a favourable framework, they cannot fill it with life on their own.

⁶ While factors like the party system or voting rights cannot be changed by individual cities, this underlines that the local framework plays a role.

Communicative Activity, Local Identity and Framing

Local discourse consists of two aspects. In addition to targeted communication about the EU as well as local EU-related activities, discourse also includes a city's Europe-related self-image.

There are different forms of targeted communication about Europe. First, communication activities make citizens aware of local authorities' horizontal and vertical activities. Second, research has shown that political knowledge has an impact on people's attitudes towards the EU (Clark and Hellwig 2012). Building knowledge about the EU, therefore, is another task of communication. Civil society organisations and associations play an important role both for school and out-of-school civic education about Europe. Third, framing (Fischer 2003; Eising *et al.* 2015) is important for the assessment of the benefits of European integration. As discussed in the broad literature on utilitarian motivations for EU support, there is a difference between 'hard' economic indicators and people's *perceptions* of their individual or collective benefits (Mau 2005). Levy and Phan (2014) deduce that political actors' framing of benefits is crucial and can influence people's perspectives on Europe. People rely on cues for assessing something as complex as the EU (Hooghe and Marks 2005; Pannico 2017) and are therefore susceptible to framing. Being strongly involved in the implementation of European policies, the local level is an important arena for communicating the concrete impact of the European Union on people's lives, but also for showing where local problems have a transnational background, thus tapping into people's 'intuitive functionalism' (Clark 2020; Barbehön 2016).

In addition to these forms of targeted communication about Europe, there is a second dimension of discourse that includes the leading ideas and images of the relationship between the local and Europe. Local discourse may be shaped by such ideas about what a city's place in Europe is (Scalise 2015). On the country level, we know that the in- or exclusive nature of national (or regional) identities enable or hinder identification with Europe (McLaren 2002; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Duchesne and Frogner 2008). Given that citizens express a relationship to the local level as surveys like the Eurobarometer show, we can expect that the in- or exclusivity of *local* identification has an impact like the in- or exclusivity of regional or national identity. Identity is not something that is easily changed. Still, local authorities may promote a certain view of local identity and culture (see Terlouw 2020) and formulate Europe-related mission statements or self-images. Local discourse, of course, is not determined by political and administrative actors alone. Rather, it is the product of interactions with both civil society organisations and individual citizens. Local stakeholders beyond public authorities contribute to processes of identity-making (Terlouw and van Gorp 2014). Local media represent and influence discourse about Europe (Barbehön 2015).

Investigating the Local Foundations of European Cohesion

In this paper, we proposed to take a closer look at the role of the local for cohesion in Europe. We argue that cities are an important avenue for creating and maintaining cohesion in Europe understood with Chan *et al.* as a two-dimensional relationship that individuals have with their polity (vertical dimension) and their fellow European citizens (horizontal dimension). While this expectation drives local and specifically urban policy, it has received little empirical investigation.

To investigate the role of the local for European cohesion, we formulate a set of expectations about the impact of local agency on European cohesion. We argue that local agency is not fed exclusively by the activities and discourse contributions of local public authorities, but also by the activities and discourse contributions of societal actors (e.g., associations, companies, etc.) who can act as European multipliers (on civil society see Bee and Guerrina 2014) and give cues (see above).

When looking at local Europe-related activities we can distinguish horizontal and vertical ones. **Horizontal activities** cover networking and exchange between different cities (on the administrative level) as well as between local associations (on a local societal level). As these provide opportunities for transnational – European – interaction, we expect these activities to increase European cohesion through enhanced transnational interaction. Also, they can be a foundation for strengthening the individual's attention to Europe and one's interest in Europe-related involvement. We expect an effect of such activities irrespective of whether citizens are fully aware of a local government's engagement. Even if they are ignorant of their cities' activities, we assume that the latter will have a certain albeit weakened effect by providing opportunities, for example for exchange, even if this is not directly perceived as Europe-related agency by a city.

Vertical activities, namely up- and downloading by public authorities and social actors, in turn, are directed at the relationship of the local population to EU policy. Interactions that enable or require local community participation can become a basis for strengthening individuals' awareness of and interest in Europe. Such interactions can be thought of both in political-administrative terms (e.g., representing local political interests vis-à-vis the EU, fulfilling obligations arising from the community's affiliation with EU policies) and in social terms (e.g., organizing participation; or organizing Europe-related social events). Consequently, we expect that European cohesion will increase if relevant activities lead to positive effects on or in the local community. This includes the effective mediation of local interests at the European level, successful application in European funding programs to address local problems, and the organization and provision of structures for effective citizen participation.

Looking at the **local discourse**, we hypothesize that the communication about Europe and the shaping of a certain image of Europe by local politicians and its social, economic, cultural, etc. elites will become a basis for drawing the individuals' attention to Europe and European integration. Also, we expect that whether and to what extent Europe is a part of local actors' self-perception (e.g. in manifestos) shapes the local discourse on Europe (cf. Barbehön 2015). This, in turn, can contribute to people's willingness to actively engage with fellow European citizens and/or to actively engage in European politics and embrace Europe as a natural aspect of their own lives and local society and polity. The effect can also be the reverse: If the discourse on Europe is very eurocritical, it can further erode cohesion. Thus, framing (of Europe and the self-images of a local community concerning Europe) can change individual perceptions of EU benefits and benefit European cohesion, but the direction of the effect depends on the type of framing: Positive framing will likely strengthen cohesion; negative framing may weaken it. Thus, there is a wide range of Europe-related activities and discourse which allows us to formulate expectations about local agency's potential impact on European cohesion. To examine these empirically, we propose to use Chan et al.'s definition of European cohesion to survey a local population. In so doing, we aim at systematically gathering fresh knowledge on the individual expression of European cohesion. An according survey must be designed in a way so that it includes both items on individual relationships with fellow citizens as well as items on the individual's relationship with the European polity. Table 2 – drawing on Chan et al.'s definition of European cohesion as explained in table 1 above – gives a (non-conclusive) overview of typical items sampled in such a survey. Since we argue that agency may have an impact mediated by the opportunities it creates, not just when it is observed and acknowledged by citizens, we rely on a wider set of variables beyond surveying citizens for their awareness and evaluation of local agency. These could, for example, be aggregated to an index of cohesion which allows a comparison, either longitudinally or between different cities, to investigate whether higher levels of activity are related to higher levels of cohesion. Thus, there will be no pre-defined threshold for cohesion; rather, it is a question of degree whose significance arises from comparison. Any comparison would, of course, have to consider different frameworks like the legal status and competences of local authorities. Thus, a comparison of cities *within* a European country should be the first step to keep other parameters constant.

Table 2: Operationalising European Cohesion

	Attitudes	Behaviour
Horizontal Dimension	Attitudes towards fellow Europeans, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • feelings of closeness • European identification 	Social participation, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • donations for or participation in Europe-related associations • participation in exchanges, town twinning activities
Vertical Dimension	EU support, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluation of EU membership • support for integration 	Political participation, e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • participation in European elections • active use of participative formats (European Citizens' Initiative, local consultations e.g. on EU-funded projects) • Europeanization of local electoral campaigns

The operationalisation allows a systematic analysis of the effects of local agency on European cohesion. Such an analysis adds a missing piece to the puzzle of understanding the determinants of European cohesion beyond the nation-state. Consequently, it submits the academic and political normative expectations about the crucial role of the local to an empirical test.

The recent Covid19 crisis has only emphasized the importance of such empirical underpinning of political expectations. Cities performed very differently in coping with the pandemic and, due to their economic structures, are also affected very differently by its consequences. Debates about stark spatial differences in incidences that represent inner-municipal inequalities and segregation have vividly illustrated the relevance of cohesion. And political disputes over border closures, travel returnees, border commuters, or solidarity with hard-hit regions and municipalities have pointed out both the European and the local dimension of cohesion and its practical consequences. Local transnational practice and attitudes are by no means independent of agency. Equally virulent is the role of cities in addressing the new refugee crisis resulting from Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Again, cities are at the forefront of dealing with this crisis, a crisis that is closely related to notions of cohesion in Europe.

The empirical research we have outlined can make an important contribution to our understanding of these processes. In the next step, the KommZuEU project will investigate cities' selected Europe-related activities and whether and how they are directed at strengthening cohesion. In addition, the link between cities' agency and citizens' relations to Europe as a polity and their fellow Europeans will be empirically illuminated through a citizens' survey in a number of case studies.

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