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# Governance Preferences of Subnational Administrative Elites in the European Union

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# **Governance Preferences of Subnational Administrative Elites in the European Union**

## **An Empirical Analysis**

Michael W. Bauer, Diana Pitschel and Philipp Studinger<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** The paper explores the preferences of subnational administrative elites with respect to crucial issues of European and subnational governance. The individual preferences of top subnational officials from five European countries are ascertained, patterns are identified and the data are interpreted. Subnational administrative elites are generally EU-friendly and supportive of the process of European integration. With respect to issues of subnational governance, our respondents would like to see moderate strengthening of the institutional nexus between regions and the EU. However, subnational interest in closer cooperation with the EU in specific policy areas remains surprisingly weak.

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## 1. Introduction

Regions and subnational authorities regularly come into focus when political scientists attempt to pinpoint changes in European political systems.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have identified a long-standing trend of regionalization and decentralization as a contributing factor to current processes of western European state transformation (Keating 1998, 2008). It has also been shown empirically that – in particular in the European Union – political authority has moved consistently downwards to subnational levels over the last five decades (Marks/Hooghe/Schakel 2008). In addition, the diminishing ability of national governments to comprehensively control subnational authorities' involvement in European policy-making must also be taken as evidence that supports claims regarding the emergence of a multilevel governance system (Hooghe/Marks 2001). Such research endeavours constitute the background for a lively academic debate about the reality and the relevance of changing patterns of subnational governance in the EU (Marks 1992; Hooghe 1995; Bauer/Börzel 2010).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the alleged significance of subnational actors and subnational politics goes far beyond purely academic interest. Several studies have pointed out that subnational authorities play a crucial role in the implementation of EU legislation (Maher 1996; Mols/Haslam 2008; Borghetto/Franchino 2009). According to estimates, between 70 percent and 80 percent of EU decisions and programmes require implementation by subnational authorities (Christiansen/Lintner 2005). Despite their apparent theoretical significance and practical relevance, however, we know little about regional elites, who they actually are and how they perceive the role of their political authorities in the emerging European multilevel system.

With the intention of helping to close this gap in knowledge, this article focuses on regional administrative elites, i.e. top-level officials in the subnational public services. These individuals are the vital link between subnational politics and administration. Given the permanency of the positions they occupy and their technical and administrative expertise, subnational top officials can be conceived of as a crucial group that influences both today's

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<sup>2</sup> We use the termini region and subnational authority interchangeably and conceive of them as political units that are located directly below the national level and have an elected assembly.

<sup>3</sup> Above all, the differential quality of interactions between supranational and subnational actors (seen by some as the harbinger of the nation state's decline, by others as merely secondary effects in an intergovernmental "play") has elicited considerable interest. For more details of the controversy about the role of the third level in EU policy-making in the scholarly debate, see Marks 1992, 1993; Hooghe 1995; Marks/Nielsen/Ray/Salk 1996; Kohler-Koch 1998; Jeffery 2000; Pollack 1995; Bache 1999.

political practice and the future political choices of the subnational authorities for whom they work.

This article thus shines the spotlight on subnational administrative elites from different EU member states and regions and on their visions of European governance. Its first aim is to investigate subnational top bureaucrats' preferences with respect to crucial questions of governance in the EU multilevel system. In this context, we focus on issues of European governance, i.e. the institutional architecture of the EU and the preferred market model for the EU; we also study subnational top officials' preferences with regard to quality and modes of subnational-supranational political exchange. The second objective is to explore the extent to which "contended issues" of European or subnational governance are related to the particular institutional backgrounds of subnational top managers.

The article is based on data from a comparative survey carried out among subnational administrative elites in five European countries. It proceeds as follows. Section 2 develops the framework of analysis by placing the research question in its theoretical context and providing an overview of the data set. Sections 3 to 6 describe the empirical analysis: Section 3 contains socio-demographic information about the individuals in our sample; section 4 presents results concerning subnational opinions on EU membership; at the heart of our empirical analysis stand Sections 5 and 6, which respectively analyse subnational preferences regarding the political order of the EU and the role of the elites' respective political authorities therein. The article ends with a conclusion and outlook.

## **2. Framework of Analysis**

The dispositions, beliefs and values of administrative elites are a classical field of study in political science and comparative public administration research (Aberbach/Putnam/Rockman 1981; Derlien/Mayntz 1988; Page/Wright 1999; Derlien 2003; Aberbach/Rockman 2006; Goetz/Dimitrov/Wollmann 2006; Schwanke/Ebinger 2006). Administrative elites prepare, design and implement policies and political decisions. The preferences of administrative elites are thus seen as important indicators of future political choices (Le Pape/Baptiste 1999; Jeffery 2000; Roller/Sloat 2002; Mols/Haslam 2008). It is also worth noting that the current debate about the transformation of government into governance – especially under the auspices of European integration – stresses technocratic expertise as a crucial resource in

effective policy-making, which can be taken as an additional incentive to revisit the attitudes of administrative elites.

The relevance of subnational administrative elites' preferences depends on how one conceives the role of preferences in policy-making. Obviously, "deterministic" arguments cannot be made about how an individual's particular attitude will lead to a precise political choice on the part of the institution this individual works for, or to an exact political outcome. The causal chain is usually too long and it is difficult to control for all the other potentially influential variables. Nevertheless, institutionalists argue that "members of an institution observe and are the guardians of its constitutive principles and standards" and that their behaviour is based on a "logic of appropriateness and a sense of obligations and rights derived from an identity, role, or membership in a political community and the ethos and practices of its institutions" (Olsen 2009: 9). Thus, there is a link between members of a bureaucracy (especially the upper layers) and the political authority for whose use the bureaucracy has been created. The individual certainly has liberty in his actions, but he is also shaped by and thus embodies the way his or her organization interprets the outside reality (Egeberg 2004).

The interest of this article is first and foremost empirical. However, our work constitutes part of a long tradition of research on elite attitudes and thus, once one agrees that subnational top officials occupy roles at the hub where subnational politics and expertise meet, there is good reason to elicit what the political preferences and opinions of such an influential group are (Le Pape/Baptiste 1999; Börzel 2005; Kooiman 2003). Subnational top officials have crucial practical powers both up (preparing decision-making, suggesting ideas) and down (implementation, supervision) the line. Given their key role in virtually all stages of the subnational policy process, it is our view that systematic knowledge about subnational top officials' preferences in regard to crucial issues of European and subnational governance can provide important factors of explanation for particular policy outcomes and that it can also be used for estimating future political choices at the subnational political level. Knowledge about subnational top officials' political preferences can thus serve as an indicator of how these individuals routinely act, and also as a potential predictor as to how they will likely use their discretion. This makes the political preferences of subnational elites a valuable object of empirical analysis.

The selection of our interviewees – high-ranking officials in subnational administrations – was carried out in three stages. Our aim was to ensure that interviewees from states with different institutional structures at the subnational level, i.e. from decentralized as well as from federal states, would be represented in the sample. Furthermore, we wanted to interview subnational elites in countries that have varying durations of experience with the reality of European integration. We thus decided to interview members of the subnational administrative elites in Germany, Spain, France, Poland and Hungary.

Second, the selection of the subnational units was guided by the consideration of including interviewees with distinct regional backgrounds. In order to increase the variance of regional backgrounds of our interviewees, three factors were of major importance: the socioeconomic status of their respective regions, and their cultural and party-political distinctiveness with regard to the centre (the nation state). Hence, we ensured that both socioeconomically poor and rich regions, regions with and without a special cultural or national self-understanding, and regions with the same and with different governing parties compared to the party-political constellation governing the centre were all represented (Marks/Nielsen/Ray/Salk 1996; Keating 2008).

Third, the individual interviewees were selected on the basis of their position in the subnational administration. In order to be included in our sample, individuals had to hold management positions – usually as a head of unit. Moreover, our heads of unit had to have policy responsibilities as opposed to only horizontal administrative or juridical duties (cf. Bauer 2008). This means that only policy-making administrators were included in the sample. Due to the varying size and the diverging responsibilities of the regions represented in our sample, the numbers of interviewees per region ranges from 1 to 13. Altogether, our sample is comprised of 347 individuals in 60 regions (see Table 1). We developed a standardized questionnaire consisting of some 100 questions. The data were collected by means of telephone interviews conducted by native speakers in the second half of 2007.

**Table 1: Sample structure**

Country	Regions included in sample	Interviews per region	Interviews per country	Response rate
Germany	13 Länder (of 16)	4-9	78	47%
Poland	12 Voivodships (of 16)	2-9	70	45%
Hungary	19 Megyek (of 19)	2-7	84	41%
France	10 Régions (of 26)	1-13	66	45%
Spain	6 Autonomous Communities	5-11	49	53%

	(of 17)			
<i>n</i> = 347				

In the following, we present the preferences of subnational top civil servants regarding crucial aspects of European and subnational governance. We start with a sociodemographic overview of the individuals at the focus of this inquiry and of their general attitudes towards national and regional membership in the EU. The primary objective of this article is to ascertain how subnational top bureaucrats with distinct institutional backgrounds conceive of crucial issues of European and subnational governance.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Subnational Top Civil Servants: Sociodemographic Patterns

Who are the people who prepare, design and implement governmental decisions within subnational administrations? Where do they come from, what are their reasons for joining the subnational civil service and what is their professional background?<sup>5</sup>

The subnational administrative elite in the countries under consideration is predominantly male and middle-aged. Nearly 40 percent of the interviewees are between 46 and 55 years old; about 30 percent are over 55 years old. As for many other top positions in the public and private sector, the share of women is significantly lower than that of men. In fact, only about one third of the people represented in the sample are women.

Apart from two exceptions, all interviewees have a university degree. Their disciplinary background is, however, quite heterogeneous. Within the German Länder administrations, we observed a predominance of people trained in law and public administration, although the share of lawyers and public administration specialists in the German Länder administrations is somewhat lower than in the federal administration (Luhmann/Mayntz 1973; Schwanke/Ebinger 2006). Among the Spanish and French subnational administrative elite, we also found a relative predominance of public servants trained in law or public policy. However, officials with other educational backgrounds, e.g. economics, natural sciences, and social sciences and humanities, are almost equally represented. Among the Polish and Hungarian subnational top bureaucrats, economists constitute the largest group.

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<sup>4</sup> Our data reveal that as regards the questions addressed in this article, national preference trends are clearly and robustly identifiable. This encourages us to focus on the presentation and comparison of the results of the national subsamples.

<sup>5</sup> For more detailed information on the sociodemographic backgrounds of the subnational administrative elites represented in this sample, see Pitschel 2010.

**Table 2: Educational background**

	<b>Law and public administration</b>	<b>Economics</b>	<b>Natural science</b>	<b>Social sciences and humanities</b>	<b>Engineering and technology</b>	<b>Agronomy</b>	<b>Other</b>
<b>Germany</b>	37.7	14.3	15.6	18.2	13.0	1.3	-
<b>Poland</b>	17.4	30.4	27.5	7.3	13.0	1.5	2.9
<b>Hungary</b>	29.5	41.0	1.3	12.8	9.0	-	6.4
<b>France</b>	26.6	18.8	18.8	18.8	10.9	4.7	1.6
<b>Spain</b>	24.5	16.3	16.3	22.5	10.2	10.2	-
<b>Total</b>	24.9	27.6	15.4	15.4	11.3	3.0	2.4

Source: Authors' data.

Our interviewees have served in subnational administrations for an average of over twelve years. This figure suggests that top officials must gain intra-organizational experience before they are appointed to managerial positions – a fact that especially true in Germany. Around 95 percent of the German interviewees have served for at least six years within the Länder administration. Our data indicate that within regional public administrations in Germany, seniority is still very important. In other countries, the number of respondents who entered the subnational public administration no more than six years previously is significantly higher, i.e. seniority appears to be somewhat less of an issue there.

**Table 3: Working experience within the regional administration**

	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Hungary</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Spain</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Up to 5 years</b>	5.1	37.6	27.4	50.8	30.6	29.3
<b>6-15 years</b>	42.3	56.6	41.6	36.9	32.7	35.4
<b>More than 15 years</b>	52.6	5.8	31.0	12.3	35.7	35.3
<b>Average time in current position (years)</b>	5.8	2.8	6.0	2.6	3.8	4.4
<b>Percentage of respondents since less than one year in current position</b>	7.8	45.7	22.6	4.8	10.2	19.0

As regards “time on the job”, the trends are similar. German respondents entered their current position on average 5.8 years ago. The proportion of administrators who have been in their current position for less than one year is highest in Poland and Hungary. Usually, public administration analysts interpret personnel stability (over time) and professional homogeneity as factors that foster the potential for administrative independence with respect to the political leadership (Mayntz 1978).



The career paths of our top managers testify to a high degree of mobility and flexibility within the subnational administrative elite. Our data reveal that 85 percent of all interviewees have obtained work experience outside the subnational administration. Furthermore, about 13 percent of our respondents did not start their career in the public administration, but in the private sector. Comparing the work experience of subnational administrators in the five countries, the Spanish interviewees show the highest share of individuals with experience in the private sector, closely followed by the French.<sup>6</sup> Around 14 percent of German and 11 percent of Polish regional civil servants have gained experience outside the public administration. In Hungary, however, the segregation between the public and private sectors still appears to be pronounced.

**Table 4: Working experience outside the subnational administration and outside the public sector (in percent)**

	Germany	Poland	Hungary	France	Spain	Total
<b>Experience outside the subnational administration</b>	72.7	97.0	88.9	96.8	64.6	84.8
<b>Experience outside the public sector</b>	14.3	10.6	2.6	21.3	22.6	12.7

Finally, we asked about the motivations of subnational officials for joining the regional civil service. Based on a typology developed by Luhmann und Mayntz (1973: 53ff.), we classified sources of motivation in three different categories, namely intrinsic, moral-political and extrinsic factors.<sup>7</sup> Within our sample, extrinsic motivation appears clearly dominant. Only among German administrators do moral-political reasons for joining the service appear to be prominent. In addition, German and French subnational civil servants also score high with respect to levels of intrinsic motivation. If one differentiates between various extrinsic motivations, good salary and career prospects score lower on average than job security. Moreover, our data suggests that none of our interviewees joined the subnational civil service because of excellent remuneration prospects. In Spain and the Eastern European countries, officials tend to indicate extrinsic reasons as the source of their motivation to join the subnational service. By contrast, in Germany and France, intrinsic reasons score high; and in

<sup>6</sup> Within the French system, it is easy for bureaucrats to switch between the private and public sector. This system is termed “pantouflage” (Rouban 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Intrinsic motivation concerns aspects of the actual work content. In contrast, if someone is motivated by the desire to contribute to the common good of society, he follows a moral-political motivation. Extrinsic motivation, finally, has its sources in issues that are not related to the work content but concern any “outside incentives” (e.g., salary).

Germany and (to a lesser extent) in Spain, i.e. in the federal or quasi-federal state systems, we find strong commitment towards developing one's own region, which we interpret as a moral-political motivation.

**Table 5: Motives to join the subnational administration**

Motive	Germany	Poland	Hungary	France	Spain	Total
<i>Intrinsic motivation</i>						
Interesting working area	23.1	8.6	13.3	20.0	10.4	15.4
<i>Moral-political motivation</i>						
Contribution to the development of the region	32.1	5.7	0	1.5	18.8	11.3
<i>Extrinsic motivation</i>						
Secure job	2.6	1.4	4.8	0	41.7	7.9
Good salary	0	0	0	0	0	-
Good career prospects	6.4	11.4	18.1	15.4	4.2	11.6
I was offered this job	5.1	7.1	38.6	15.4	8.3	16.0

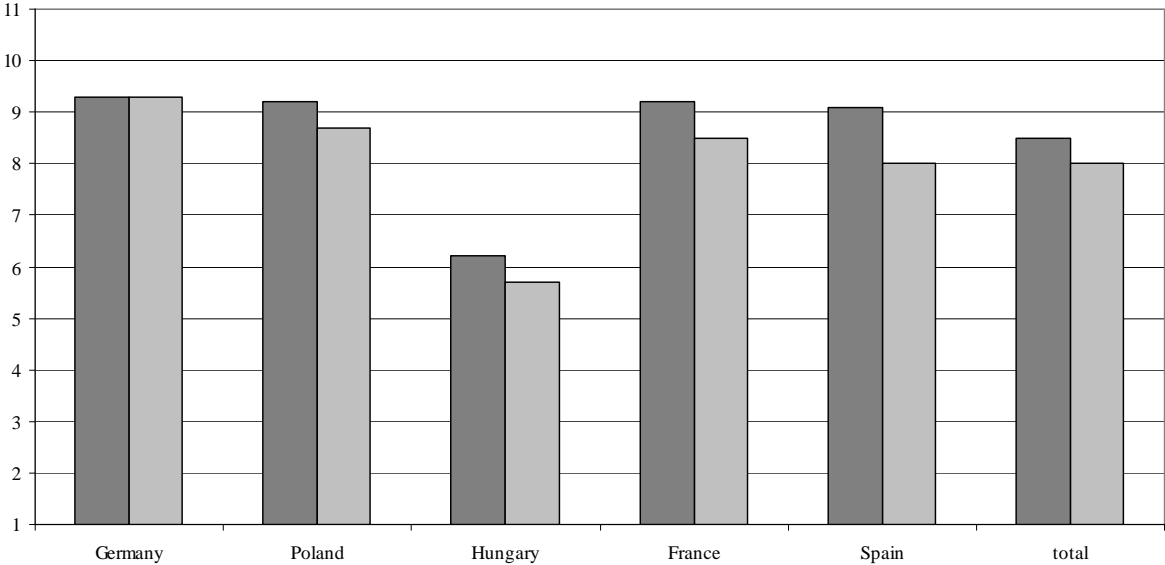
*Note:* Multiple answers were possible. The table reports the percentages of interviewees indicating the respective source of motivation.

The analysis of the education and work experience of subnational officials and of their motivations for joining the subnational civil service reveals quite differential patterns, which distinguish subnational civil servants from one country to another. Focussing on the similarities in our sample, the typical subnational top manager is trained in law, although economists and other social scientists are on the rise; he (as there are relatively few women) is in his 50s, has some level of seniority and thus has intimate knowledge of the institution he works for; as such, he knows the public service better than the private sector. He is motivated by intrinsic, moral-political and extrinsic reasons, varying by country of origin. Especially in quasi-federal and federal countries, moral-political motivation is strong.

#### **4. Subnational Assessment of EU Membership**

How do the subnational elites assess the benefits of EU membership? How do they assess the strength of the EU’s impact in their own particular policy field? Generally speaking, EU impact in the policy field is perceived to be strong. A total of 40 percent of our interviewees see a medium degree, and 57 percent even a very strong degree of EU influence in their own policy fields. This suggests that the subnational elites are well aware of the EU’s importance and of the consequences of European decisions for subnational affairs. Apart from being conceived as strong, the impact of the EU is also positively assessed in general. The following tables show the results of the questions as to whether “your nation state” and “your region” have benefited from EU membership: the higher the score the more positive the assessment.<sup>8</sup> The results presented in Table 1 indicate that, on balance, national and regional membership are assessed quite positively by nearly all subnational top bureaucrats regardless of their national background. But there are differences. First, the benefits for one’s own region are generally seen as being *less* positive than those for the nation state. Second, the Hungarian subnational elite appears to be more sceptical than subnational elites elsewhere. Third, only in Germany is the assessment of national and regional benefits equally positive. By implication, four fifths of the subnational elite in our survey sees more national than regional advantages in EU membership; thus, subnational officials would probably agree that there is room for improvement in respect to what the EU has to offer to subnational actors.

**Table 6: Assessment of the benefits of EU membership for the nation state and for the region**



*Note:* Dark gray indicates the nation state’s benefit; light gray reflects the subnational authority’s benefit.

<sup>8</sup> Obviously, the low values in Hungary show that Hungarian respondents assess the benefit less positively than the majority in all other countries. Nevertheless, the Hungarian mean value lies in the medium range of the scale.

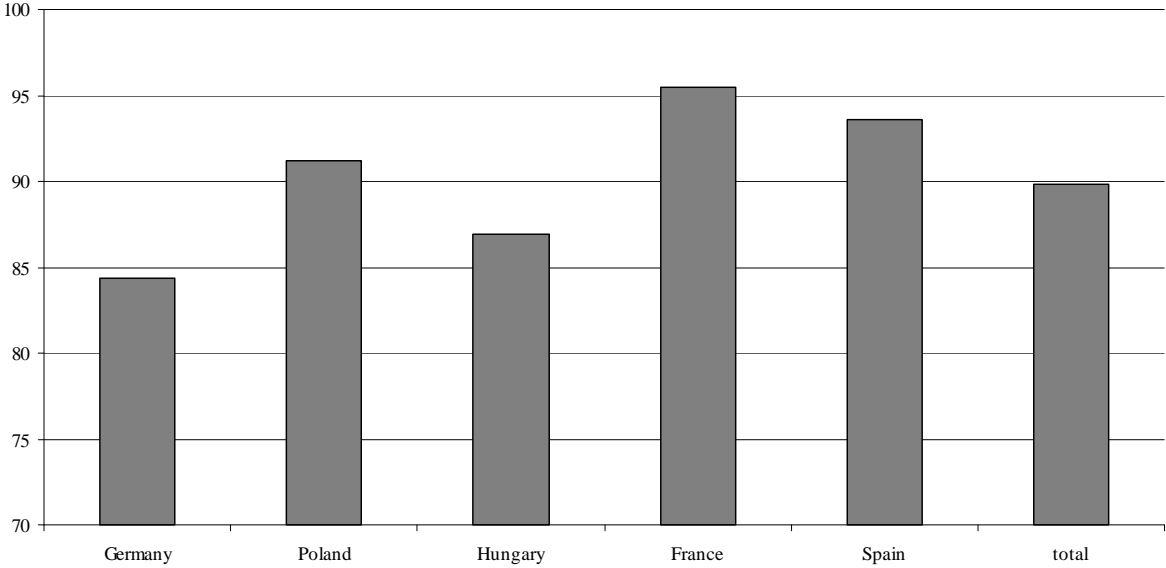
## **5. Subnational Top Bureaucrats' Preferences Regarding European Governance**

The preferences of subnational administrative elites in regard to European governance are conceived along two dimensions that are thought to capture the specific features of policy-making in the EU multilevel system. In a first step, we refer to the general institutional architecture of the EU and to the cleavage between supranationalism and intergovernmentalism as principles in shaping the European polity. In this context, we asked where political authority in the EU should be primarily located and whether the member states or the supranational institutions should occupy the driver's seat. Second, we focus on subnational elite preferences in regard to the economic principles that should constitute the basis for the EU and asked whether our interviewees had a predilection for market liberalism or state interventionism (see Hooghe 2001). What is the preferred model for how the EU should organize the economy?

### ***Institutional Architecture of the EU***

With respect to the allocation of authority in the European polity, a simple question is: What is the preferred decision-making principle in the Council of Ministers? In other words, are the interviewees in favour of majority voting or in favour of unanimity? The overwhelming majority (90 percent) of interviewees state that they prefer the majority principle over unanimity (see Table 7). Only 10 percent of all interviewees are in favour of unanimity as the general decision-making rule. These data indicate that the vast majority of subnational civil servants favour a supranational over an intergovernmental architecture in the EU.

**Table 7: Decision-making rule in the Council of Ministers**



*Note:* The table reports the percentages of respondents by country favouring majority voting as the decision-making rule in the Council of Ministers.

In general, our interviewees appear to be in favour of strong supranational institutions. We used a battery of questions to tap into the supranationalist-intergovernmentalist divide. For example, we asked questions such as “Should the Commission become the government of Europe?”, “Should the European Parliament have equal rights to the Council?”, “Should the European Court of Justice settle disputes between member states?” The subnational administrative elites are either neutral or even embrace supranationalism as the ordering principle of EU governance. The Spanish interviewees, especially, favour a strong Commission. It is not surprising that subnational administrators do not support the idea of the Commission strictly following the instructions of the member states, which would turn the Commission into a kind of an intergovernmental body. Only the Polish subsample indicates some reservation about very strong supranational institutions. This political attitude is also reflected in the lower mean value with regard to the statement that the European Parliament should have the same rights as the Council of Ministers during the legislative process. Nevertheless, by and large our subnational elites are quite strong supporters of a supranational EU.

**Table 8: Supranationalism versus intergovernmentalism**

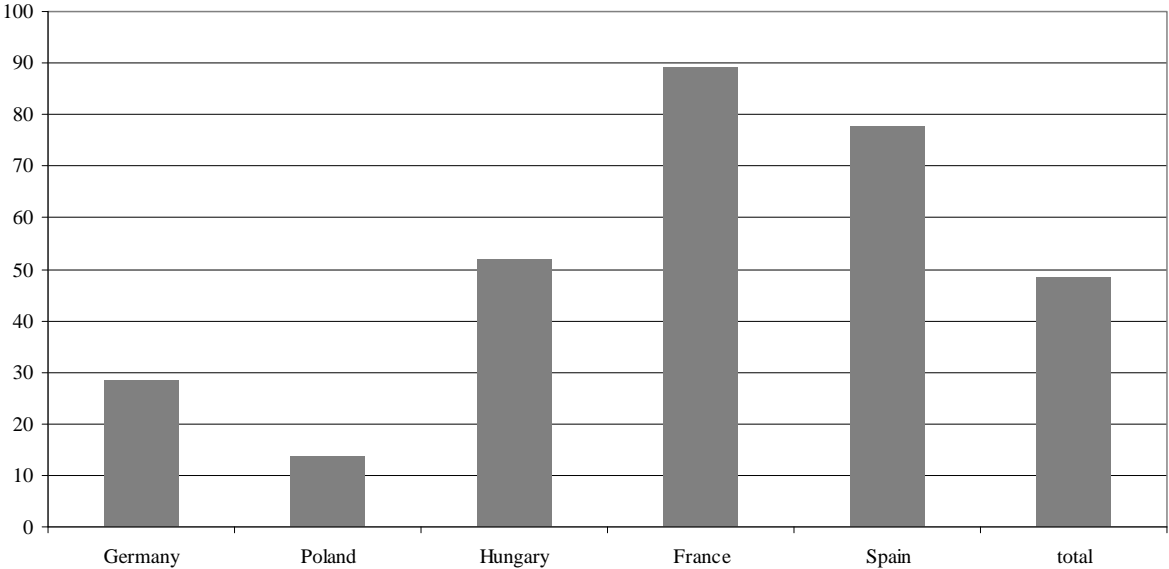
	Germany	Poland	Hungary	France	Spain	Total
European Commission as government	7.0	6.3	7.9	6.5	8.3	7.2
Mandatory instructions for the European Commission	4.7	6.9	4.0	4.8	4.9	5.0
European Parliament having equal rights to the Council	8.5	6.5	7.0	7.3	8.9	7.6
Final judgement by the ECJ concerning disputes between member states and the EU	7.7	8.9	9.5	8.0	9.1	8.6

*Note:* The table reports the means by country. The scale of the possible answers ranges from 1 (strong disagreement) to 11 (strong agreement).

### ***Role of the EU in Economic Issues***

Concerning the second crucial aspect of European governance – the role of the EU in economic and social issues – we first addressed the interviewees’ “philosophical stance on economic issues”. We followed the common distinction between a market-liberal versus a regulated capitalism stance (see Table 9). A market-liberal view means that the state should intervene very little in the economy and that it should be the responsibility of the citizens to take care of their own social security. In contrast, regulated capitalism is characterized by a strong role of the state in the economy, i.e. through cross-subsidizing of public sector activities and guaranteed comprehensive social security schemes. Our data reveal that the sample is split in nearly two equal parts. While 48 percent of the respondents favour regulated capitalism as the state model for the EU, the other half prefers a market-liberal model. But there are remarkable differences if one compares the national means. Subnational elites in France and Spain are enthusiastic supporters of state-regulated capitalism as the guiding model for the EU, while the majority of German and Polish interviewees favour a market-liberal orientation.

**Table 9: State-regulated capitalism**



*Note:* The table reports the percentages of respondents by country favouring state-regulated capitalism as the model for the EU.

One would now expect the market liberals in our sample to be critical of an active EU role with respect to intervention in the European economy. However, the opinion that the EU should seek to ensure similar living conditions in European regions finds broad agreement among *all* interviewees. French and Spanish respondents, who prefer state-regulated capitalism as a model for the EU, are naturally also in favour of a high capacity for intervention at the supranational level. However, there is a certain discrepancy among Polish civil servants' answers. Although they subscribe to a market-liberal ideal for the EU, at the same time they support interventive measures to improve regional development.

**Table 10: Capacity of EU for intervention**

	Germany	Poland	Hungary	France	Spain	Total
Capacity of EU for intervention	6.9	9.6	8.6	8.5	8.7	8.4

*Note:* The table reports the means by country. The scale of the possible answers ranges from 1 (the EU should not possess any capacity for intervention in market and social affairs) to 11 (the EU should possess strong capacity for intervention in market and social affairs).

Summing up, the subnational top bureaucrats in our sample clearly lean towards supranationalism. A clear preponderance of interviewees is in favour of majority voting in the Council of Ministers and also expresses a generally positive opinion about the strengthening of supranational institutions. Data on the preferred role of the EU with respect to managing

the economy, however, reveals certain differences. First, our sample is nearly equally split between supporters of regulated capitalism and supporters of market-liberal capitalism. Second, the preference for the market model varies along national lines. Whereas the French and Spanish respondents clearly favour regulated capitalism, top bureaucrats in Poland and Germany tend to support the market-liberal model. Third, these cross-country differences disappear when more concrete measures come into focus; at least this is our interpretation of the fact that Polish free-marketers turn pragmatists when EU intervention is likely to result in additional resources for boosting regional development.

## **6. Subnational-Supranational Governance ... Seen from Below**

The second part of the survey deals with subnational elites' preferences regarding key issues of subnational-supranational political exchange. In this context, we asked the following questions: Do subnational officials believe that their governments can have an impact on influencing EU decisions? How would they like to organize crucial elements of what can be understood as the subnational-supranational institutional nexus? And, most importantly, in which areas of public policy-making do they see a benefit in cooperation with the supranational level? Prospects for influencing EU decisions, assessment of the emerging basis for institutionalized political exchange between the subnational and the supranational arena, and perspectives for cooperation with the European level across a broad range of policy fields are, in our view, the three most important dimensions of subnational-supranational governance.

### ***Prospects for Influencing EU Decisions***

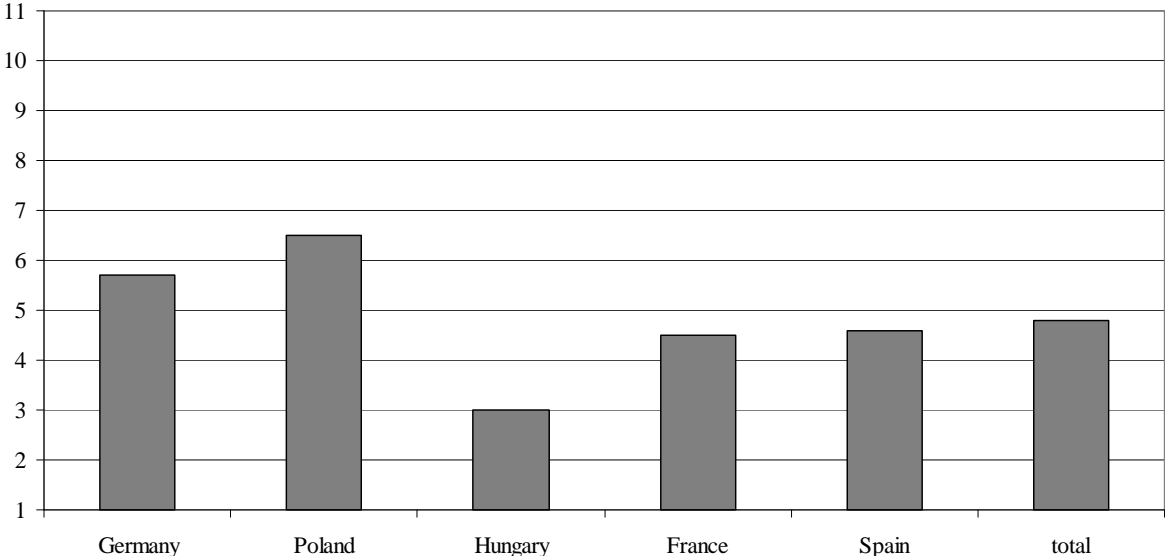
A crucial question for the organization of subnational-supranational relations is whether one believes that subnational political engagement has an impact on supranational decision-making. For this purpose, we asked how subnational top officials assess the overall success of their region in influencing decisions at the EU level. In a nutshell, our respondents are not exaggeratedly enthusiastic in their assessment of their ability to influence supranational decision-making. The mean for all respondents lies in the medium range of the scale, indicating that top bureaucrats have a neutral position. The Hungarian interviewees respond somewhat more negatively than the others. In general, Hungarian respondents perceive only a low capacity to influence decisions at the European level. This seems to be in line with the



above findings that Hungarian respondents assess the national and regional benefits of EU membership more cautiously than their counterparts in the other countries. By contrast, the majority of French and Spanish interviewees tend to estimate their region’s ability to exert influence on EU decisions as low, even though they see EU membership as such as quite beneficial for their country and for their region.

The subnational elites of Germany and especially Poland are most sanguine in assessing their influence at the European level. Nonetheless, even they remain in a relatively modest “medium range” in the assessment of their potential. All in all, the confidence of the Polish subnational elite is as surprising as the relative modesty of Spanish and especially German regional top officials – given that the latter are able to operate in the supposedly favourable constitutional context of a federal or semi-federal system. One can speculate about whether the relatively positive Polish expectation as to the potential for exerting influence is owed to a lack of experience as “EU newcomers” and whether the German modesty is a function of disappointed hopes after many years of experience with the subnational-supranational nexus. At any rate, the point is that we see solid and positive expectations everywhere with respect to subnational ability to influence EU decision-making. This expectation might be more modest in some countries than in others, but subnational elites everywhere appear to believe in the fundamental importance of subnational-supranational political interaction.

**Table 11: Assessment of regional success in influencing decisions at the EU level**



*Note:* The table reports the means by country. The scale of the possible answers ranges from 1 (not at all successful) to 11 (absolutely successful).

### *Institutional Intensification of Subnational-Supranational Interaction*

Having established that subnational elites see some room for improvement in their capacity to influence EU decisions, the next question is how they assess elements of the institutional set-up of this subnational-supranational exchange. Thus, we examined our interviewees' attitudes concerning crucial elements of the institutional nexus between subnational authorities and the EU: the participation of regional parliaments in the early warning system, the possibility to delegate regional ministers as national representatives in the Council of Ministers, the option of bringing before the European Court of Justice suspected cases of breaches of the subsidiarity principle, and the usefulness of the Committee of the Regions as the formal representation of subnational interests in the political system of the EU. These elements (and whether and how to change them) have been part of the discussion about the strengthening of the regional dimension of the EU in recent years (Bauer 2006).

When asked whether they support the inclusion of subnational parliaments in the "early warning system", i.e. whether they are in favour of being able to signal to the European Commission their suspicion that a proposal violates the subsidiarity principle, subnational top officials display strong sympathy. Only German bureaucrats appear less supportive than their counterparts elsewhere – not a surprising result if one considers that German federalism has a strong bias in favour of executive multilevel cooperation (which structurally passes over the regional parliaments).

The Maastricht Treaty already established the possibility of regional ministers participating in the Council of Ministers as representatives of their respective member states (Hooghe 1995). Use of this option is made in cases where the Council of Ministers is negotiating policies that come under regional responsibility.<sup>9</sup> How do subnational elites assess this institutional linkage with the European arena? Surprisingly, we receive somewhat lower mean values of support for this instrument than for the option to file subsidiarity complaints in the early warning procedure. The reason for such reservations might be that subnational representatives in the Council of Ministers negotiate on the basis of a "national" position that (usually) already represents a compromise between central and subnational governments; therefore, regional delegates cannot unconditionally promote the position of their individual subnational authority. Furthermore, the pattern is similar with respect to complaints to the ECJ if a region

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<sup>9</sup> In the subnational mobilization literature, this constitutes one of several channels of representation (Hooghe 1995; Hooghe/Marks 1996)

suspects a breach in the principle of subsidiarity. Generally speaking, there is support for such an option. Spanish, French and Hungarian respondents are very much in favour, the German subnational elite much less so.

**Table 12: Strengthening of the institutional nexus**

	Germany	Poland	Hungary	France	Spain	Total
Integration of regional parliaments in national early warning system	7.9	8.7	9.0	8.8	8.6	8.6
Possibility to delegate a subnational representative to the Council of Ministers	6.9	8.2	8.1	8.3	8.4	7.9
Right to file an action at the ECJ if the principle of subsidiarity is endangered	5.3	7.4	8.1	8.5	8.9	7.5

*Note:* The table reports the means by country. The scale of the possible answers ranges from 1 (strong rejection) to 11 (strong support).

Finally, we asked about the future desired for the Committee of the Regions, which by many accounts constitutes the single most important institutionalized channel of interest representation between the subnational and the European arenas (Hooghe 1995; Hooghe/Marks 1996). We gave four options: “abolish the CoR”, “keep it in its current form”, “strengthen the role of the institution in the policy-making process” and, finally, “make it a true ‘third chamber’”. The majority of our interviewees favoured the third option and wanted to give more rights to the CoR. In addition, about one fifth of the interviewees responded that the CoR should be endowed with equal competence to the Council of Ministers or the European Parliament. However, the deviant opinion of German subnational administrators becomes obvious again; about one third of them simply want to maintain the status quo as far as the CoR is concerned.

**Table 13: Future role of the Committee of the Regions**

	Germany	Poland	Hungary	France	Spain	Total
Abolishment	13.3	1.5	4.0	8.2	4.2	6.4
Maintain the status quo	34.7	16.4	14.7	13.1	6.3	18.1
More rights at the stage of law formulation	41.3	61.2	61.3	54.1	75.0	57.4
Equal third chamber alongside EP and Council of Ministers	10.7	20.9	20.0	24.6	14.6	18.1

*Note:* The table reports percentages of respondents by country.

All in all, the data reveal a general preference among subnational administrators for the status quo in regard to institutionalized interaction between subnational authorities and the EU. This is especially true for the future role of the CoR. Furthermore, except for some reservations

among the German subnational elite, we find strong cross-national support for a stronger integration of regions into the EU multilevel system.

### *Cooperation with the EU in Specific Policy Areas*

A crucial issue in the context of subnational engagement in multilevel governance is the participation of the subnational level across policy areas.<sup>10</sup> We thus asked subnational top bureaucrats to decide whether or not regional authorities should be involved in policy-making across a range of twelve specific policy areas.<sup>11</sup> In general, the interviewees showed only a moderate desire for subnational policy participation: on average, they only want subnational competences in about four policy areas.

However, national differences become evident when the national mean values are compared. Whereas Hungarian respondents are satisfied with few competences (1.6), the Spanish demand extensive competences in about eight out of twelve policy areas. The Polish (4.8), French (4.3) and German (3.4) subnational elites desire only modest codetermination rights across policy areas in the EU multilevel system.

Besides these findings, we also explored the preference patterns in more detail by distinguishing between low and high politics. Policies in the latter category primarily fall under the sovereignty of the nation state. The former category, by contrast, comprises tourism, culture & schools system, business development & structural policy, health & consumer protection, environmental protection, research & technology, agriculture and social policy. Here, subnational participation in decision-making is de facto already often the case. Working on the basis of this distinction, we find that when subnational administrators seek more policy involvement, they do so in the category of “low politics”. In policy areas such as tourism and culture & schools system, we find broad support for allocation of competences to subnational authorities. Furthermore, regional competences in the fields of health & consumer protection, environmental protection, and research & technology enjoy a medium level of support. With

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<sup>10</sup> Aware of the fact that multilevel governance is a complex concept comprising aspects of policy competences and also of varying modes of coordination and interaction (Benz 2007; Benz/Zimmer 2008; Tömmel 2008), we focus on the former.

<sup>11</sup> The twelve policy areas are social policy, asylum & immigration, foreign & defence policy, health & consumer protection, border police & border protection, culture & schools system, agriculture, tourism, environmental protection, monetary policy, business development & structural policy, and research & technology. Note that we are not able to differentiate between administrative and legislative competences.

regard to high politics, very few subnational administrators favour the involvement of regional authorities.

**Table 14: Regional policy competences**

	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Percentage of respondents preferring subnational participation</b>
<i>Low politics</i>	tourism	71.4
	culture & schools system	67.4
	business development & structural policy	49.3
	health & consumer protection	42.7
	environmental protection	42.6
	research & technology	39.9
	agriculture	29.1
	social policy	22.1
<i>High politics</i>	asylum & immigration	18.9
	foreign & defence policy	15.3
	monetary policy	12.1
	border police & border protection	2.1
	<i>All policies</i>	<i>34.4</i>
	<i>Low politics average</i>	<i>45.6</i>
	<i>High politics average</i>	<i>12.1</i>

With respect to our focus on the nexus between the subnational and European governmental levels, we were interested in finding out under which conditions subnational top bureaucrats want the regions to engage in an intensive exchange with the European level. We therefore looked for those policies in which subnational top bureaucrats wanted the regions and, at the same time, the EU to hold competences. Wanting to share responsibility between subnational and supranational levels can be taken as evidence that in these areas the “multilevelness” of the governance structure requires strengthening in the eyes of the subnational elites. Thus, the question is, in which policy areas do subnational bureaucrats want both the EU *and* their subnational authority to hold competences.

On average, respondents chose only one out of twelve selected policies in which they want the regions and the EU to share competences. At values of 2.4 and 2.2 policies, respectively, French and Spanish top bureaucrats are slightly more in favour of an institutionalized policy nexus between the subnational and supranational levels than German and Polish interviewees (1.1 and 0.9 policies, respectively). Hungarian top bureaucrats displayed no preference at all for shared competences between regions and the EU.

However, our results revealed interesting information about the policy-specific structure of these preference patterns. We identified four policies in which we found broad support for a stronger nexus between regions and the EU in policy-making: research & technology, business development & structural policy, tourism and environmental protection (see Table 15). Moreover, in comparison to the general participation of subnational authorities in these four policy areas (see Table 14), the preferences for a supranational-subnational nexus are strong. Around half of respondents favouring subnational competences in these policy areas want the EU as a partner. However, the results in Table 15 also indicate that preferences for EU and regional cooperation in policy-making vary cross-nationally. Around one third of the German and Polish, and half of the French respondents, regards shared responsibilities as being most useful in business development & structural policy. Spanish respondents, however, prioritize subnational-supranational cooperation in research & technology, tourism and environmental protection.

**Table 15: Preferences for European and subnational cooperation on different policies**

	<b>Policy</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>Poland</b>	<b>Hungary</b>	<b>France</b>	<b>Spain</b>
<b>Low politics</b>	tourism	12.3	7.1	0	0	18.5	48.0
	culture & schools system	8.9	4.0	4.7	0	35.4	2.0
	business development & structural policy	22.8	29.7	28.8	0	50.8	6.0
	health & consumer protection	8.9	12.9	6.2	2.6	19.7	2.0
	environmental protection	23.3	19.7	18.5	1.2	46.2	42.0
	research & technology	25.3	20.0	17.7	0	36.9	69.4
	agriculture	14.5	12.3	12.3	0	19.7	38.8
	social policy	3.6	4.0	1.6	0	9.4	4.1
<b>High politics</b>	asylum & immigration	2.4	1.3	1.6	0	4.8	6.0
	foreign & defence policy	0.3	1.3	0	0	0	0
	monetary policy	4.1	1.3	0	0	0	26.5
	border police & border protection	0.6	1.3	0	0	0	2.0

*Note:* The table reports the percentages of respondents per country favouring participation by the European and subnational levels in the respective policy areas.

In sum, subnational top-bureaucrats favour the intensification of subnational-supranational political exchange – to some degree. Moreover, far from wanting to expand policy involvement in all areas, they carefully select the policy areas in which they wish to see allocation of increased subnational competences. The areas where the subnational elite favour competences are mainly policies in the “low politics” category. However, we find a high degree of variation between specific policies. Our respondents favour regional participation

most in the areas of tourism and culture & schools system. Furthermore, the cross-country variation suggests that the actual competence allocation within the nation state influences the preference patterns for regional policy participation within the multilevel governance system. Clearly, the subnational top bureaucrats' desire for a supranational-subnational policy nexus are very modest. Nevertheless, in some policy areas a relatively high proportion of respondents favouring regional participation prefer a constellation that fosters a stronger exchange between the supranational and subnational governmental levels.

## **7. Conclusion: The Defensive Nature of the Supranational-Subnational Nexus**

This article focuses on the governance preferences of European regional administrative elites with respect to subnational-supranational political exchange. Subnational top bureaucrats are recognized as a crucial subnational group that shapes today's political practice as well as the future political choices of the subnational authorities for whom they work. To our knowledge, this is the first time that comparative survey data on subnational administrative elites in five different countries on issues of European governance has been collected. Our data reveals a number of common features, but also many differences among the governance preferences of subnational elites in France, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Spain.

A sociological perspective on this elite revealed that the "typical" subnational top bureaucrat is male, in his 50s and looks back on many years of experience in his institution. However, professional education backgrounds are heterogeneous; in Germany there is high probability that the top bureaucrat is a lawyer, in Hungary and Poland it is more likely that he is a trained economist, while in France and Spain broader varieties of educational backgrounds exist. The motivation for joining the subnational administration in the case of Spain, Hungary and Poland appear to be the privileges that come with the office, whereas in Germany and France intrinsic motivational reasons score high; in the federal or quasi-federal state systems Spain and Germany, we find strong commitment towards developing one's own region. The assessment of the benefit of EU membership is higher everywhere for one's own nation state than for one's own region. It is also worth noting that in our data (although this may be an implication of the relative low numbers of interviewees in certain regions) we find that "national" patterns prevail, i.e. subnational top bureaucrats are likely to answer questions in a similar way to their national compatriots. Differences in answer patterns between regions from different states are usually higher than from regions within one and the same state.

With respect to what we call European governance, we found that subnational elites from all countries are decidedly “supranationalist” in their preferences; they want majority voting in the Council, and they want strong supranational institutions and a Commission that is able to act independently of the member states’ governments. This consensus regarding the institutional order of the EU does not stretch unrestrictedly to the EU’s capacity to intervene in the European economy, however. Here, the southern Europeans (France, Spain) are more enthusiastic, while others, especially the Polish subnational elite, are rather sceptical – although the Polish lose this scepticism if the issue is whether the EU should intervene with European resources in fostering economic development in Poland’s regions.

However, the most interesting findings lie in the area of subnational preferences as to how subnational-supranational governance relationships should be shaped. In this context, we distinguish roughly between an institutional and a policy nexus. The subnational elites – with the exception of Germany, where reservations are palpable – are clearly in favour of strengthening the institutional channels for political exchange with the EU (access to the Court of Justice to defend subsidiarity, integration of regional parliaments in the early warning system, strengthening of the CoR, etc.). They are, however, much less keen on working jointly with the supranational level in policy-making.

Our results here must be interpreted with caution. Little interest in participating with the EU in policy-making across specific areas is clearly a function of the – in general terms – modest desire of subnational elites to “expand” their competences into new policy areas. On the basis of our data, we conclude that subnational administrative elites have a very realistic understanding of where subnational policy priorities lie – namely in areas like tourism, culture & schools system, business development & structural policy, health & consumer protection, environmental protection, research & technology, agriculture and social policy. These are precisely the areas where subnational authorities already enjoy most of their actual competences. Analysing subnational preferences regarding cooperation in policy-making within these “low politics” areas, we find that the most likely candidates for an intensification of the subnational-supranational nexus are the areas of research & technology, business development & structural policy, tourism and environmental protection. However, in terms of policy reallocation in the EU multilevel system, subnational top bureaucrats are actually very conservative and appear to prefer to maintain the status quo.



In other words, *subnational elites conceive their cooperation patterns with the European level on the basis of what they know from their nation state's vertical allocation of policy competences*. The obvious question, then, is why would subnational elites show more enthusiasm for intensifying the institutional nexus, which simply constitutes channels for potentially joining in EU decision-making, and at the same time remain so reserved when it comes to indicating where they see substantial need for cooperation across governmental levels in specific policy areas? We tentatively conclude that subnational elite preferences in this respect indicate that there is little hope (or fear) of a transformative governance dynamic fuelled by the expansive agendas of subnational levels; subnational elites' yardstick for competence allocation appears to be the reality of their respective national systems and not a vision of an emerging European multilevel system in which their level could expand its authority.

This view is supported by the finding that instead of wishing to extend the policy nexus, subnational elites appear more eager to upgrade the institutional nexus. After all, the institutional nexus is basically a defensive tool, good for alerting to and, if possible, inhibiting threatening EU decisions. At the same time, it does not entail obligations in terms of positive subnational action. Intensifying the policy nexus and entering into the challenges of multilevel policy-making would require more proactive behaviour (and probably a broader resource base than most of the subnational authorities in our sample have at their disposal). Our data thus suggests that subnational elites think that there are limits to what their subnational authorities should do and where they should engage in intensifying the subnational-supranational nexus in multilevel policy-making. Such self-restriction is of great interest – not only to those expecting huge transformative repercussions from multilevel policy-making also at the subnational level. However, why subnational elites are so reserved about intensifying subnational-supranational policy cooperation remains a question for future research in this area.

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