

## *Engagement with the EU by Local and Regional Authorities from South East Europe*

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This is the first and at present only study on engagement with the EU by local and regional authorities from South East Europe. Its purpose is to explain why and how these authorities engage directly with the EU. This knowledge is crucial to understanding the governance of this region, which is one of the most important ones for the future enlargement of the EU, and which is key to peace and stability in Europe. The research was conducted through semi-structured interviews of officials from associations of

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local and regional authorities from South East Europe and other relevant actors (Network of Associations of Local Authorities from South-East Europe – NALAS, European Committee of the Regions, European Commission). This article also innovates the literature on multi-level governance in the EU, traditionally primarily focused on engagement with the EU by sub-national authorities from long-standing EU member states rather than on sub-national authorities from non-EU member states.

*Keywords:* local and regional authorities, South East Europe, European Union, NALAS, multi-level governance

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This study concerns engagement with the European Union by local and regional authorities from South East Europe (SELRAs). The research covers local and regional authorities from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo,<sup>2</sup> Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, and the European part of Turkey (East Thrace). Most associations of the local and regional authorities from these countries are or have been members of the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS), which engages in lobbying and representation in Brussels on their behalf.

Through semi-structured interviews of officials of associations of local and regional authorities from countries in the region (Albania, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia) and other relevant actors (the aforementioned NALAS, as well as the European Committee of the Regions and the European Commission), the study aims to identify and analyse the EU policies SELRAs are trying to have an impact on, and the objectives they pursue on the EU level; the activities of SELRAs regarding the

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank all the officials interviewed for taking the time and effort necessary to provide us with information. Our gratitude goes also to the anonymous reviewers of the paper whose comments were very helpful. Any remaining mistake is solely our responsibility.

<sup>2</sup> This designation is without prejudice to positions on the status of Kosovo and is in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, and the International Court of Justice's opinion on Kosovo's Declaration of Independence.

EU; the communication flows between SELRAs and the EU; and the role that cooperation with the respective national government and participation in European networks of local and regional self-governments has in influencing EU decision-making.

Engagement by sub-state actors with the EU has been studied widely, including engagement by local and regional authorities (LRAs) from EU member states. There are, however, few and narrow-in-scope studies on engagement on the EU level by LRAs from non-EU countries, and virtually none on engagement by LRAs from South East Europe. A literature review has revealed the existence of one article on North Macedonia's LRAs' Brussels office (Hristova & Cekik, 2015), one discussing the Republic of Srpska's representation in Brussels (Marciacq, 2015), and one on Turkish LRAs and the EU (Özçelik, 2017). This evidences a considerable gap in the literature. This study will therefore contribute new knowledge regarding a largely unexplored aspect of LRAs' engagement with the EU in relation to an important region of Europe, and will enrich literature on multi-level governance (MLG), so far predominantly confined to engagement with the EU by LRAs from long-standing EU member states rather than those from non-EU countries (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Piattoni, 2010; Rowe, 2011; Panara, 2015; 2016; Tatham, 2016).

After the introductory chapter (1), the scope and methodology of the study are explained (2) and a theoretical framework based on MLG theory developed (3). The central part of the study consists of five sections (4.1-4.5) dedicated to the engagement of SELRAs with the EU from the perspective of SELRAs themselves, but also of NALAS, of the European Committee of the Regions, and of the European Commission. In the final chapter (5), concluding remarks are presented.

## 2. Scope and Methodology

The study relates to LRAs from South East Europe which is an important region of Europe not only because of the size of its population (c. 80 million), the high volume of trade with the EU and its geographical proximity to the EU, but also because this region features a kaleidoscope of relationships with the EU. It includes EU member states, states that in recent years have developed close political and economic ties with the EU and are candidates for accession to the EU, long-standing candidates for EU membership (Turkey, which applied for membership in 1987),

states with various types of association agreements with the EU, as well as Kosovo, which is not even recognised as an independent country by some EU member states. Studying South East Europe holistically finds its legitimacy in the geographical commonality and shared historical heritage of this region. Accordingly, it is expected that despite the same geographical position and similar cultural and historical factors, the current status of the relationship between a country and the EU will affect the engagement of SELRAs with the EU.

For the purpose of this study, we selected the countries whose associations of LRAs are members of NALAS. Membership in that network shows that they perceive themselves as part of the same region, with a unique identity and broadly common interests. Greece is also geographically a part of South East Europe (although sometimes placed in the broader region of Southern Europe), but is not included in the present study. Whilst geographically Greece is a part of South East Europe, linguistically, culturally and politically it has a different identity. Unlike other South East European countries, Greece has been a member of NATO since 1952, has never been a socialist state, and has been a member of the European Economic Community since 1981. Long-standing EU membership in particular differentiates Greece from all others. Furthermore, Greek LRAs are not members of NALAS, which shows how they do not see themselves as part of this macro-region. On the other hand, Slovenia and Moldova (often placed in Central and Eastern Europe) are included in the study due to the fact that their LRA associations are members of NALAS, but also due to similar historical paths with other selected countries and their relationship with the EU. Whilst Slovenia became a member of the EU in 2004, Moldova was granted EU candidate status in 2022.

The request to conduct interviews was sent to all the associations of SELRAs and all the representative local offices in Brussels from the 12 aforementioned countries, as well as to NALAS. In total, 10 organisations from six countries plus NALAS participated in the study. Accordingly, this study and its results relate specifically to the following countries and organisations:<sup>3</sup>

Albania (since 2006 associated to the EU through a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, and since 2014 official candidate for accession

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<sup>3</sup> Personal names of the interviewees are not indicated in the paper due to the obligation undertaken by the authors that personal information collected during the study will be anonymised and remain confidential. All the interviewed officials are people in leadership or senior positions in their respective organisations.

to the EU; in 2020, the Council of the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Albania):

- Association of Albanian Municipalities (AAM) – The Association was created in 1993 to promote the interests of local government units in Albania. AAM was established on 12 October 1993 on request from 10 mayors. Since 2023, this association has been merged with the Tirana-based Association for Local Autonomy. At the time of the interview, there were five full-time staff in the Secretariat. The Association employed people in relation to particular projects if their experience was needed in relation to particular EU projects.

Croatia (member of the EU since 2013):

- Croatian County Association (CCA) – This is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation dealing with the promotion of local self-government interests. There are four employees in the CCA.
- Association of Cities in the Republic of Croatia (ACRC) – This is an association that comprises cities/towns as local self-government units in Croatia. The Association was founded in 2002 but launched its activities in 2008. There are five full-time and two part-time employees. One employee works on the activities related to the EU, but in the cases when activities concern EU projects, more employees (two or three) are involved.
- Dubrovnik-Neretva County (DNC) – The Dubrovnik-Neretva County (122,000 inhabitants, five towns and 17 municipalities) operates an office in Brussels. The office was founded in 2010 by the Dubrovnik-Neretva County Development Agency DUNEA and by the DNC. Activities related to the EU are those concerning EU projects which are dealt with by DUNEA. The office pertains to DUNEA and the Centre for Entrepreneurship, a local company owned by the DNC. At the time when the interview was conducted the office had one employee. However, due to the COVID-19 crisis the activities of the office were paused and since then never reactivated. DNC and DUNEA are now informed on current events in Brussels via information and communication technology and plan their follow-up activities accordingly. According to them, the costs of keeping informed about developments in Brussels are now smaller with identical results.
- During the first 7–8 years since its opening, the DNC office also comprised two further counties, Brod-Posavina and Vukovar-Srijem.

They are now represented by the office of Slavonija, Baranja and Srijem (SBS). This represents five Croatian counties (Osijek-Baranja, Brod-Posavina, Požega-Slavonia, Virovitica-Podravina, and Vukovar-Srijem). The office was established in 2019 and registered at the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) as the representative of the five aforementioned counties. Osijek-Baranja county has had a representative office in Brussels since 2007. This was active until the opening of the new office in 2019. The role of the office is monitoring relevant legislative and policy changes announced by the EU. All five indicated counties cooperate with their regional development agencies which are coordinators of regional development. Each development agency has 20–40 employees. The regional development agency of Osijek-Baranja County is the coordinating body of the Office. Currently, there are 40 employees in the Osijek-Baranja agency. At least two employees from each regional development agency together with employees from the counties' administration (mainly, the mayor's office) are in charge of international cooperation. The number of employees dealing with particular activities of the Office depends on the needs in each specific situation. However, only one employee works in the Office in Brussels as a delegate of the Osijek-Baranja regional development agency. The Office is registered in the Transparency Register of the EU.

Moldova (since 2016 associated to the EU):

- Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova (CALM) – This is an association of more than 800 local authorities from Moldova. There are currently 12 members of the Secretariat on the website of the organisation.<sup>4</sup>

Montenegro (since 2010 associated to the EU through a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, and since 2010 official candidate for accession to the EU; in 2011, the Council of the EU decided to open accession negotiations with Montenegro):

- Union of Municipalities of Montenegro (UMM) – This is a national association of local authorities from Montenegro. There are 11 employees in the organisation, one of which is responsible for European integration issues. Due to the low number of employees, activities are conducted within five committees in the organisation (utility servic-

<sup>4</sup> CALM website: <https://www.calm.md/en/despre-noi/secretariat/>.

es, protection of environment, financing, local self-government system, and European integration). Committees include people from municipalities as units of local self-government, and communication between the Union and the members of committees is carried out on an everyday basis.

Serbia (since 2013 associated to the EU through a Stabilisation and Association Agreement and since 2012 official candidate for accession to the EU; negotiations currently ongoing about possible accession):

- Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM) – It is the successor of the former Yugoslavian organisation of local authorities founded in 1953. In its current form, the organisation started to function in the 2000s as an association of towns and municipalities and town municipalities in Serbia. Town municipalities are not units of local self-government. They are founded by large towns (cities) and are themselves large (e.g. New Belgrade with c. 300.000 inhabitants). All the municipalities, towns and town municipalities are members of the SCTM (167 in total). Approximately 71 employees work in the SCTM, three of them working in the Department of International Cooperation and European Integration. The SCTM acts via several bodies: the General Assembly, the Presidency, eight line committees as permanent working bodies that bring together representatives of towns and municipalities (mostly political officials, but sometimes experts, local civil servants) about important issues in the field of local self-government activities in order to exchange experiences and formulate joint initiatives, 27 networks of professionals – experts from the local level, with the task of considering and proposing innovative solutions that will further improve the position and operation of local self-government (some networks are rather large, with 50–100 members). The networks discuss specific issues and the common stand is then sent to the relevant line committee and further to the presidency, national and other authorities, including the EU.

Slovenia (Member of the EU since 2004):

- Association of Urban Municipalities of Slovenia (AUMS) – There are three associations of municipalities in Slovenia. This Association was created 13 years ago and it is the youngest among the three associations. In Slovenia there are two types of municipalities, regular and urban municipalities. This association comprises the 12 urban municipalities, whereas the other two cover all the other municipalities

(c. 200 in Slovenia). The Association has three employees and one of them is fully financed through an EU project. The Association also avails itself of the cooperation with the staff based in local administrations.

- Association of Municipalities and Towns of Slovenia (AMTS) – This association, with its 189 municipalities, is the biggest and oldest association of municipalities in Slovenia. Six urban municipalities are also members of this association (as well as of AUMS). The association has eight employees.

South East Europe (in general):

- NALAS – It is a regional organisation connecting local government associations from 12 countries in South East Europe. The headquarters is in Skopje, North Macedonia. Some of the aforementioned organisations are full members (AMTS, ACRC, UMM, SCTM, CALM) or associate members of NALAS (AAM). NALAS was created in 2001 and has 13 full-time employees in the secretariat. In addition to the aforementioned 13 full-time employees, there are also part-time employees. Their function is knowledge management, hence they are called knowledge management assistants, who operate in relation to the various NALAS members. There are, therefore, 27 staff in total who work for NALAS, 14 part-time and 13 full-time in the secretariat.

Representatives of these organisations were interviewed by the authors of this article between July 2019 and September 2021. The semi-structured interviews were the subject of a qualitative analysis.

The data emerging from the interviews with SELRAs officials was complemented and cross-validated in 2021 through semi-structured interviews of one EU official working at the CoR and one working at the Directorate General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). The questions concerned their experience of and perspective about working with SELRAs and their associations including NALAS, to determine more precisely their perception of the engagement and role of SELRAs in relation to the EU. Cross-validation is a method used in leading studies on the engagement by LRAs with the EU (Tatham, 2008; 2016). Further cross-validation, updating and double-checking of the data took place in May 2024 via focused email exchanges with two further officials working at the CoR who had not been involved in the previous cross-validation in 2021.



In total, 11 semi-structured interviews with 12 officials from SELRAs were conducted, and two semi-structured interviews with officials from the EU. In May 2024 the draft paper was sent to all interviewees (those from both SELRAs and the EU) and to officials from the Association for Local Autonomy (Albania) in order to check whether any changes had occurred in the meantime. As previously mentioned, in May 2024 the paper was also sent to two further CoR officials for additional cross-validation, updating and double-checking of data accuracy. On the basis of comments provided by seven interviewees and two further officials from the CoR, the paper was updated in early June 2024.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

MLG provides the theoretical framework for this study. At a very general level, MLG indicates the dispersion of authoritative decision-making across multiple actors at different territorial levels within the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2001). MLG in the context of the EU looks at sub-state actors and their role in EU political processes, and more specifically at their interaction with other actors in the context of the EU and their influence on EU decision-making (Marks, 1992; Hooghe & Marks, 2001; 2010; Piattoni, 2010; Stephenson, 2013; Cygan, 2013; Panara, 2015; Simonato, 2016). The notion of MLG in the context of the EU can be used to describe a number of phenomena including in particular the following:

- (1) A federalism-like system in the EU or at the national level with multiple tiers of government (European, national, regional, local). This is referred to as Type 1 MLG (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Marks & Hooghe, 2004; Piattoni, 2010).
- (2) Governance based on special-purpose agencies, which is referred to as Type 2 MLG (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Hooghe & Marks, 2003).
- (3) Public-private partnerships in the context of the EU Regional Policy (Marks, 1992; Bache, 2004).
- (4) Negotiation of policy by private and public players on the national and EU level (Schmitter & Kim, 2005).

Type 1 MLG understands authority as dispersed primarily across jurisdictions or authorities at different territorial levels. These jurisdictions or authorities – international, national, regional, meso, local – are “general-purpose”, in that they bundle together multiple functions, policy re-

sponsibilities, and in many instances, such as the EU or the federated units of federal states (i.e., German and Austrian *Länder*), also a court system and representative institutions (Marks & Hooghe, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2010). Hooghe and Marks suggest that in this type of governance every citizen is located in a Russian doll set of nested jurisdictions, where in principle there is only one relevant jurisdiction at any particular territorial scale (Marks & Hooghe, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2010). These jurisdictions are intended to be, and usually are, stable over a relatively long period of time (years or even decades), even though the allocation of policy responsibilities across levels might change or be flexible. The archetype of Type 1 MLG is federalism, which is concerned with allocation and sharing of powers among territorial jurisdictions (Hooghe & Marks, 2010; Marks & Hooghe, 2004). The same or similar considerations are applicable to regional systems and in general to all constitutional systems where local autonomy is recognised and operates, such as those of the countries analysed in this study, although to varying degrees.

Type 2 MLG comprises task-specific jurisdictions (“agencies”) dealing with *ad hoc* issues, such as, transport, waste and recycling, water quality monitoring etc. In Type 2 MLG there are intersecting memberships in that the agencies operate within a territory which is not neatly contained within the borders of a larger jurisdiction, and may therefore manage issues concerning citizens belonging to different territorial communities and states. The number of agencies is potentially unlimited and flexible, as in theory there could be as many agencies as required by the various issues on the agenda, and the agency system could be reviewed as appropriate at any point in time (Marks & Hooghe, 2004; Hooghe & Marks, 2010).

Apart from the national state, the EU is probably the most advanced and complex example of Type 1 MLG, even though Hooghe and Marks highlight that certain areas of EU governance reflect Type 2 MLG arrangements; e.g., the distinct governance systems or “pillars” for the different policies; the multiplication of independent European agencies; the enhanced cooperation in certain fields, such as monetary policy and border controls (Hooghe & Marks, 2010; Bache, Bartle & Flinders, 2023).

The focus of this study is on the engagement of sub-national authorities from South East Europe with the EU, including how they attempt to have an impact on EU decision-making processes and to implement EU policies effectively. Type 1 MLG provides, therefore, the most appropriate and reliable theoretical framework for this study. This choice finds

its justification in the prominent role of Type 1 MLG in the context of the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2010). It also finds justification in the widely shared suggestion, coming especially from legal scholars, that the EU is a *sui generis* and supranational federation which features many elements of a traditional federation (Schütze, 2012, even though he criticises the use of the adjective *sui generis* in relation to the EU; von Bogdandy, 2009).

According to a different narrative of MLG proposed by Piattoni (2009; 2010), there are three different but combined “axes”, i.e., three dimensions of MLG. The first is “centre v. periphery”, which indicates movements away from the unitary state towards decentralised systems of governance (federal or regional state). The second is “domestic v. international”, which indicates movements away from the national state towards increasingly structured modes of international cooperation and regulation, including the EU. The third is “state v. society”, which portrays movements towards increasing involvement of non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations in authoritative decision-making and policy implementation. This study, which focuses on engagement with the EU by sub-state authorities from South East Europe, operates along the axes “centre v. periphery” (including Type 1 MLG) and “domestic v. international” (including the shift of authority from the member states to the EU, or from states that are closely associated with the EU to the EU), whilst the third dimension of MLG (“state v. society”) is not part of our current analysis.

This study analyses the behaviour of LRAs from countries belonging to the same region, South East Europe, ranging from EU member states to states with various associations with the EU to candidates for membership. As such, this study embraces a notion of European integration that looks beyond the role of national governments and analyses the activities of sub-state actors both from EU and non-EU countries (see Panara, 2022; 2023). All of them are impacted on by the EU as a result of the actual or progressive “fusion” (Wessels, 1997; Guderjan & Miles, 2016) or “amalgamation” in the EU (*Amalgamierung*, Nettesheim, 2012) resulting from the coordination of the EU and the national governance systems (originating, e.g., from an association with the EU and from candidacy for EU membership and therefore progressive convergence towards EU policies and standards).

South East Europe is therefore a macro-area of Europe where we can see a range of dynamics at play, and where we can identify and analyse, in light of MLG theory, influences between the EU and the sub-state level in relation to the countries with various types of relationships with the EU. The analysis of LRAs from South East Europe demonstrates that

there is an influence from the EU that goes beyond the LRAs from member states, and that also impacts other countries that are in a particular relationship with the EU. LRAs from EU and non-EU countries, in turn, influence or try to influence the respective central governments to push forward or potentially oppose EU agendas. They also engage directly with the EU (e.g., through their Brussels offices or, locally, through the national delegations of the Commission) to influence or simply to learn about EU policy developments or best practice.

Influence on policy in the EU depends largely on communication flows between stakeholders and EU institutions. The notion of MLG comprises the study of these communication flows and their impact on EU policy-making processes. A study conducted in 2011 on the role of the regions in EU governance (Panara & De Becker, 2011), in the wake, however, of the findings of previous analyses of the same topic (Jeffery, 1997; Toniatti, Palermo & Dani, 2004; Lambertz & Große Hüttmann, 2009), subdivides these communication flows in two types. The first type is direct communication between the local/regional level and the EU. The second type is indirect communication between these two levels of governance. The first type includes direct participation in certain processes, such as, the works of the Council of Ministers of the EU and representation in the CoR (Piattoni & Schönlaue, 2015). A further example of direct participation, albeit opaque in its precise contours, is the direct lobbying of LRAs with the Commission and MEPs. The second type of communication includes essentially attempting to influence EU processes indirectly through the national government. This is obviously only, or at least more easily, achievable by LRAs from the EU. It can therefore be expected that SELRAs from outside of the EU are more likely to communicate and engage with the EU through channels such as NALAS, due to the existence of less linear channels of communication and influence for them.

The thrust of MLG is the coexistence of multiple actors and various levels of authority. These actors operate in the context of the EU, sometimes in cooperation or jointly with the national government, other times individually, e.g., through their paradiplomacy or other activities in Brussels. Cooperation with the national government is usually intensive when the interests of the localities are aligned with those of the national government. When this alignment is not in place, localities try to engage directly with the EU institutions in Brussels. This is a well-known finding of the literature on MLG concerning sub-national authorities from the EU (Hooghe & Marks, 2001; Benz, Broschek & Lederer, 2021; Tatham, 2021). The

same appears to be true in relation to the countries and organisations analysed in this study, including those that are not in the EU.

In light of this theoretical framework, it is possible to make sense of an important aspect of the governance of this region of Europe, analysing if and how the behaviour of the relevant actors reflects MLG patterns, and how this behaviour is similar or differs between countries depending *inter alia* on the relationship of each country with the EU. This study adds new knowledge and insights to the findings of MLG literature regarding LRAs in the context of the EU, in that earlier MLG literature has been so far largely confined to EU member states, whereas we are also looking at some important third countries closely associated with the EU and geographically located in South East Europe.

## 4. Results of Empirical Research

### 4.1. Focus of the Studied Organisations: EU Policy Areas and Objectives

EU legislation is largely or mostly implemented by LRAs (CoR 2009; Bauer & Börzel 2010; Tatham, 2021). As a result, among the aims of SELRAs associations from both EU and non-EU countries there is the building of capacity for the implementation of EU policies at the local level at present or in preparation for accession (AAM, AUMS, UMM). Areas of particular relevance to the SELRAs from both EU member states and candidate countries include sustainable development, urban environment, utility services (such as waste management and water supply), social services (social security, education and health) and culture. SELRAs are also interested, although to a smaller extent, in other areas such as digitalisation (CCA), gender equality (CCA), youth policy (AMTS), public procurement (SCTM), and energy (NALAS).

The policy areas the representatives of SELRAs are interested in depend largely on the status of their state in relation to the EU (member or candidate), and on the organisational form of the representation (Brussels-based office or not). SELRAs from candidate countries, e.g., are interested in the EU enlargement and in obtaining pre-accession funds to strengthen their capacity for the implementation of EU policies in preparation for accession (AAM, UMM, CALM, NALAS), whereas SELRAs from EU member states indicate the cohesion policy as their primary fo-

cus (AUMS, AMTS, CCA, SBS). AUMS, for instance, devotes 80 to 90 percent of its EU-related activity to the cohesion policy since this is a very important source of funding for Slovenian urban municipalities. AUMS is involved in the implementation of the cohesion policy in Slovenia as the intermediate body for the selection of projects of sustainable urban development co-financed by EU and state funds through the Integrated Territorial Investments (ITI) mechanism.

It is important to note that SELRAs organisations from candidate states reveal that those countries are still working towards the achievement of the minimum standards required for EU accession. For instance, AAM organises training on topics such as tackling corruption in local administration, CALM advocates for the establishment of local democracy, autonomy and decentralisation in Moldova, and SCTM promotes justice and fundamental rights.

In addition to EU funding opportunities, the SELRAs with representative offices in Brussels (DNC, SBS) focus on the representation and promotion of the respective regions in areas such as agricultural and rural development, tourism, economy, and on international cooperation.

## 4.2. Activities Regarding the EU and their Relative Importance

LRAs from various EU and non-EU countries engage in lobbying with EU institutions through their offices in Brussels. This area of activity, however, does not appear prominent for the SELRAs. Whilst some of the interviewed officials mentioned this as an activity their organisation engages in, none of them indicated this as the most important area of activity.

SELRAs from candidate countries mentioned lobbying with the EU delegation in their country to shape the EU approach to the country, and to provide financial support to promote the integration of the country in the EU (AAM, CALM). Others suggested this was not the most important area they focus on (UMM), or did not include lobbying among their current activities due to the difficulty of having an impact on EU decision-making processes as a candidate country (SCTM). Surprisingly, these findings do not diverge fundamentally from those of SELRAs from member states, none of which mentioned lobbying as their primary area of focus. One explanation of this can be the limited capacity of the offices

and the small size of the regions they represent (DNC), although AMTS suggested that they see lobbying as something negative and therefore outside of their remit.

Supplying information to the EU is closely linked to the political goal to influence the EU decision-making processes. None of the organisations from non-EU countries mentioned engaging in direct lobbying with the EU. Nevertheless, these associations and NALAS itself do supply information to the EU, e.g., through the network of Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) and Working Groups, and the annual Enlargement Day conference run by the CoR. This happens through policy dialogue and exchange of best practice and outside of any formal reporting relationship.

The landscape is different in relation to organisations from member states. These, including those that do not engage in lobbying with the EU, ascribe great importance to the supply of information to the institutions, either via the formal consultation processes of the Commission (SBS), or as part of the exchange of information that normally takes place in Brussels (DNC). It is important to note that both SBS and DNC operate (or used to operate) offices in Brussels which offer them the opportunity to engage in these exchanges with the EU institutions. The organisations that do not operate offices in Brussels mentioned less regular and less structured contacts with the institutions, such as speaking to members of the Commission who visit Slovenia in relation to the Cohesion Policy (AUMS), and organising trips to Brussels for groups of mayors to meet representatives of the Commission (AMTS). Lately, AUMS also developed a good working relationship with the Representation of the European Commission in Slovenia, which acts as an embassy of the EU in the country and therefore constitutes an important direct link to the EU.

All the organisations that took part in this study, except for one (CCA), highlight their role in supplying information to member localities about EU funding and legislative developments in Brussels. This finding meets our expectations since most of these organisations are associations of local authorities. Sharing information with the membership about the EU is therefore an essential part of their work. For SELRAs from candidate countries the importance of this field of activity also originates from the need to promote convergence towards EU regulatory standards (AAM, UMM).

Networking with other local authorities from the EU appears to be a further important area of activity of the analysed organisations. There are at least two dimensions to the said engagement. The first is the mere sharing of best policy and administrative practice. The second is more political

and concerns the ability to strengthen their own voice in the EU by joining or creating coalitions with other local authorities. This is not unique to SELRAs, in that regions from other parts of the EU and from outside the EU behave in the same manner (Panara, 2022; 2023).

EU funding features prominently among the activities of the studied organisations, both those from EU member states and those from non-EU countries. In relation to the local authorities from candidate countries, this area of work ranges from the provision of training for local authorities on EU funding (AAM, SCTM) to support in obtaining funds from the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance to strengthening local capacities in relation to the preparation of project proposals in the future (UMM). CALM and the Moldovan local authorities do not receive EU aid to development directly. This goes to the national government and this approach causes friction between the local authorities and the Commission, because the local authorities feel that they do not benefit sufficiently from this aid which becomes a vehicle of further centralisation. For local authorities from the member states, this area of activity has an important role in the context of the cohesion policy. Some organisations select funding projects for the central government (AUMS). Others assist the member local authorities with the identification of suitable partners (AMTS), or the preparation and management of projects (CCA), or in some cases their input is limited to sharing information with stakeholders on available EU funding (SBS).

The promotion of the image of the localities or regions in the EU does not feature prominently among the activities of SELRAs. This can be explained by the fact that most of the analysed organisations do not operate permanent Brussels offices and do not represent one individual locality or region. This conclusion is corroborated by the finding that among the studied organisations, SBS is the only one that rates highly the importance of promoting the recognition of the Slavonian region to promote tourism and investment in the local economy. This is achieved *inter alia* through the participation in ceremonial events in the EU. The DNC, which like SBS had an office in Brussels and represented one county, mentioned participating in the Open Days of the EU institutions and in the CoR's European Week of Regions and Cities with promotional activities and presentations, as well as organising gastronomic events, exhibitions, and the Feast of Saint Blaise (patron saint of Dubrovnik). In addition, the DNC organises political conferences and workshops in Brussels on topics important for the DNC and partner regions. AUMS also took part in the European Week of Regions and Cities and hosted an online workshop.



NALAS plays an important role in supporting the national associations of SELRAs. In addition to lobbying on their behalf, this comprises the sharing of knowledge and best practice among its members, including in relation to the implementation of EU directives and regulations in fields such as water management and environmental protection. NALAS also plays an important role in relation to EU funding in that it facilitates the creation of networks for joint applications and supports the funding bids through the initial screening of the applications, proposal writing and project management.

Regarding activities related to the EU, there are therefore no significant differences between EU and non-EU member states. All SELRAs and representative offices are mostly engaged in informing member localities about relevant EU issues such as funding and legislation, then networking with other local authorities, and conducting activities related to EU funding. Lobbying and supplying information to the EU are less established, while promotion of localities and regions in the EU is delegated to their respective representative offices in Brussels. This corroborates our initial hypothesis that engagement with the EU and participation in EU-related activities is not confined solely to LRAs from EU member states and that MLG theory needs to factor in the contributions to the EU of these LRAs and the impact of the EU on them. Type 1 MLG in relation to the EU in particular requires the study of the behaviour of LRAs from non-EU member states.

### 4.3. Direct and Indirect Engagement: Communication Flows between SELRAs and the EU

SELRAs from the EU communicate with EU institutions directly, e.g., through the CoR or other bodies (committees of the European Parliament and individual MEPs), or through the Brussels-based offices representing them. A number of communications, however, are indirect and occur through the permanent representative of their country in the Council or through the national government (e.g., ministries in charge of the judiciary, public administration, foreign and European affairs, European funds *inter alia*) that SELRAs lobby with to ensure that their interests are represented in Brussels (AUMS, AMTS, CCA). The communication is bidirectional and flows both from SELRAs to the EU and vice versa (AMTS, ACRC, DNC). It was highlighted that in some cases the volume of communication from the EU regarding, e.g., new legislation, policies

and funding opportunities is more significant than that from the local level to the EU (ACRC, DNC), arguably with the result that in these countries the EU shapes local governance more than the LRAs from the same countries shape or attempt to shape EU law and policy.

Some of the non-EU organisations participating in this study highlighted that occasional meetings with representatives of EU institutions do not produce any particular effect, hence the establishment of direct channels of communication between national associations of LRAs and EU institutions could be beneficial (AAM, UMM). EU delegations in non-EU countries perform an important role in filling the gaps in the communication flow. Communication and reciprocal engagement are particularly intense in relation to programmes of cross-border cooperation (SCTM). The CoR's system of Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs), set up under the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (currently in place for Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, about to be formed with Albania in 2024, and requested by Ukraine and Moldova) are channels for organisations from non-EU countries to share their opinions directly with the EU institutions. In addition, the CoR has formed Working Groups to cover enlargement countries without a JCC of their own yet. JCCs are the official, institutional route for LRAs from the enlargement countries to access the EU machinery and prepare for EU membership. They are set up under the Stabilisation and Association Agreements (thus not by the CoR itself, though the CoR represents the EU in them). JCCs are made up of equal numbers of EU and candidate country political representatives, i.e., elected local and sub-national representatives – who in an ideal world should then transmit the results of their discussions to the “technical-administrative” local level and to the relevant national associations of LRAs. JCCs and Working Groups are therefore “political” forums (as opposed to merely technical) for exchange (at least this is how the CoR sees them).

Some of the studied organisations operate(d) Brussels-based offices. This is the case with two Croatian organisations, SBS and DNC, and previously, from 2007 to 2019, also with the Croatian Osijek-Baranja County. The DNC opened an office in cooperation with the Italian region Molise that provided premises in Brussels free of charge. Among the advantages of having a permanent representation in Brussels, the SBS mentioned the personal contacts with staff and policymakers from EU institutions, and the opportunity to participate in networking events that would otherwise not be accessible.

All the other studied organisations liaise with the EU from the home country without a permanent presence in Brussels. This includes NALAS, which does not have a representative permanently based in Brussels, al-

though two representatives of NALAS including the director hold regular meetings in Brussels at least four times a year with their contacts in EU institutions. NALAS representatives also participate in and contribute to events in Brussels, such as the Enlargement Days and the European Week of Regions and Cities (formerly Open Days) organised by the CoR.

Among the studied organisations, four informed us that they had considered opening an office in Brussels but had in the end decided not to do so. AAM acknowledged that not having an office in Brussels is a considerable limitation. Obstacles to the creation of a Brussels office include the cost (AAM, UMM, SCTM), domestic political divisions (AAM) and limited access to EU funding before entering the EU (UMM). In 2013, the SCTM created a 3-month post in Brussels in the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions' representation office to test the possibility of creating an office there. Afterwards, however, it realised that the full cost of operating a Brussels-based office was too high for local units. The three aforementioned organisations (AAM, UMM, SCTM) are all from non-EU countries. An association from the EU, however, the AMTS, manifested similar scepticism about the value for money of an office and added that the lack of an office in Brussels is well compensated by good connections and cooperation with the ministry of external affairs, Slovenian members of the CoR, and permanent representatives of Slovenia in Brussels.

NALAS is the organisation from the region that attained the most regular, significant and successful communication and engagement with the EU. For instance, as a result of this association's lobbying, the Commission / DG NEAR created for the first time a local government working group in 2020. Besides lobbying, which is partly about one-to-one meetings with staff and representatives from EU institutions, NALAS also presents its position during conferences and by supplying information to the EU regarding the region it represents. NALAS maintains contacts with DG NEAR, the CoR and, in the context of the CoR, with CIVEX, which is the Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs of the CoR, administratively also in charge of the CoR's JCCs and WGs with the countries relevant to this study. Additionally, NALAS maintains contacts with the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), the EEAS, the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), as well as with MEPs. A representative of DG NEAR confirmed to us that the EU cooperates with NALAS often better than with national governments since this network of sub-state authorities genuinely believes in European integration. From the perspective of DG NEAR, as a non-party-political organisation NALAS is a useful interlocutor to understand the

system of sub-national governance in South East Europe and the perspective of SELRAs in relation to important matters concerning European integration. The CoR has recommended “that the European Commission establish direct communication and cooperation with LRAs through existing regional networks, such as NALAS” (CoR Opinion 18 April 2024). Our analysis confirms from an MLG point of view that the EU plays a highly important role in the overall governance of South East Europe. There are regular communications flows between the EU and the sub-state level from both EU member states and non-EU countries. It emerges clearly from our study that communication and more generally engagement with the EU by SELRAs from non-EU countries are less significant and probably less impactful than those of SELRAs from EU member states. This might be a consequence of the fact that the EU is greatly interested in LRAs when it comes to the implementation of EU policies and of the *acquis communautaire* (Koprić, 2014), which is only relevant to LRAs from the EU. However, even in relation to SELRAs from the EU, although direct channels of communication with EU institutions are available (MEPs, CoR etc.), the communication is more frequently indirect (through national associations of LRAs or national authorities). Furthermore, the advantage of having an office in Brussels is that it provides an additional channel of communication with the EU, although the focus of the analysed offices is more on the promotion of the represented region or regions than on efforts to influence European policies. This is not necessarily the result of a choice but a consequence of the small size of the offices that are not resourced and staffed for time-consuming activities such as policy influencing (see Panara, 2022 in relation to EFTA countries). It seems that there is a twofold added value of NALAS. First, in providing representation of SELRAs from non-EU countries and, second, in approaching the EU with issues arising from LRAs from the analysed region, which are usually weak in terms of powers and resources.

#### 4.4. Indirect Engagement: Cooperation with the National Government

AAM, SCTM and UMM work with national authorities in their countries in relation to the implementation of EU laws in preparation for accession to the EU. Although not always easy, this dialogue with the government is important because it makes the government aware of the difficulties the local authorities could face in the implementation of EU legislation.

Cooperation with the national governments also takes place in relation to shaping integration in the EU of the countries concerned. The UMM, e.g., is part of the accession negotiations with the EU in 11 out of 35 chapters and during the Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance II programme, it was included in two working groups, one for programming resources in the field of environmental protection, and the other for programming resources in the field of good governance. Similarly, SCTM plays a role in the chapters concerning the environment and the Cohesion Policy.

At the same time, some associations from non-EU member states also directly pursue their contacts in Brussels and Strasbourg regarding issues that are of specific interest to the local authorities. For example, in case of noncompliance of national authorities with the European Charter of Local Self-Government, the AAM, in addition to lobbying with the national government, also speaks directly to the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities and facilitates visits to Albania to monitor compliance with the Charter, initiatives that are not always welcomed by the Albanian government.

The organisations of SELRAs from EU member states behave in accordance with the expected pattern, typical of MLG, whereby if the interests of SELRAs are aligned with those pursued by national government authorities, these cooperate and/or support the national ministries (AUMS, CCA, DNC). When there is no alignment of interests, however, the organisations pursue their interests separately from the state (AUMS, ACRC). Sometimes it is difficult for the local level to approach and influence EU institutions directly, so it is useful to find an ally in the national government (AMTS). When there is an office located in Brussels, the communication with national institutions is carried out mostly through national representatives in the EU such as the Permanent Representation of the country in Brussels, an embassy in Belgium and Luxembourg, chambers of commerce, representative office of the tourist board in Brussels, etc. (SBS).

#### 4.5. The European Committee of the Regions and European Networks of Local and Regional Authorities

All the studied organisations are members of various networks of European regions and local authorities. One of the most important networks is the Council of European Municipalities and Regions based in Brussels (CEMR) of which AAM, AUMS, AMTS, CCA, SCTM, CALM and NALAS are members. All the studied organisations suggest that the CEMR

provides good opportunities to obtain information on many important topics for the EU, such as climate change and gender equality. Some highlight, however, that in the CEMR there is a predominance of regions and local authorities from bigger countries and EU countries, with little attention for the Western Balkans (AAM). There is no consensus, however, about this point. CALM, i.e., indicates that through the CEMR it can make its voice heard by the Commission, given that usually both the CEMR and the partner localities and regions ascribe importance to the voice of Moldovan local authorities as the only voice from an economically underdeveloped country, which is particularly important when dealing with development policies. Others point out that membership in the CEMR is too expensive for individual local authorities and this explains why members from Croatia, and more in general from the Western Balkans, are associations rather than individual counties (ACRC).

NALAS, the organisation that brings together all SELRAs, has an institutional collaboration with the CEMR for a programme called *Platforma* which is mainly targeting the Neighbourhood countries: Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova. This programme extends to these countries the services that NALAS provides for its members. NALAS also participates in CEMR organisational structure bodies, such as the Policy Committee of the CEMR. Furthermore, NALAS is active in United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), based in Barcelona, of which CEMR is the European branch. UCLG has played a very important role in setting up the UN's 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals. NALAS supplies UCLG with information from South East Europe.

The CoR, alongside NALAS, plays an important role as a vehicle of influence for SELRAs on EU decision-making processes. This aspect was highlighted in particular by some organisations that do not have offices in Brussels (AUMS, AMTS, ACRC), but also by others with an office (SBS). Some mayors of Slovenian urban municipalities (AUMS), two heads of Slavonian counties (SBS), president of the Dubrovnik-Neretva County (DNC) and president of the ACRC are members of the CoR which gives them direct access to political processes (president of the DNC is the head of the Croatian delegation to the CoR and chair of its Western Balkans Working Group, as well as a multiple rapporteur on EU enlargement policy). The analysed organisations send letters to the CoR when it prepares an opinion or fill questionnaires concerning EU legislative proposals (AUMS, ACRC). The role of the national delegations was highlighted alongside that of political groups (AUMS, ACRC). The ACRC, for instance, mentioned nine opinions so far that have been pre-

pared by Croatian members of the CoR on issues important to Croatian local self-government authorities.

The CoR is also important for networking with the LRAs from other countries (AUMS, DNC). AUMS mentioned that thanks to the CoR the Association can improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis the national government. The same Association, however, lamented the uncertain impact of the CoR on EU decision-making (the AMTS, too, appears sceptical on the impact achievable through the CoR given its consultative only function). DNC, however, offered a more positive evaluation of their participation in the CoR. As previously mentioned, president of the DNC is the head of the Croatian delegation to the CoR and has been the rapporteur for several opinions of the CoR. Through his work, the County established many contacts and cooperation opportunities. When a national delegation has its own rapporteur, this provides a chance to include issues of its interest in the opinion.

DNC added that the impact of the CoR in general and then of national delegations also depends on the topic. For instance, during the preparation of the Opinion on the Multiannual Financial Framework, other organisations (such as the Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions, CPMR) tried to lobby with the president of the Croatian delegation who was rapporteur for that particular opinion. The visibility of an opinion, therefore, becomes higher when lobbyists consider it important.

SELRAs from third countries do not have national delegations or representatives in the CoR. Nonetheless, one organisation from a candidate country (SCTM) referred to the role of the CoR. There are Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) within the CoR with the local authorities from several South East European countries with an association agreement with the EU (currently Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia; one is about to be formed with Albania in 2024, and requests have been made by Ukraine and Moldova). These meet twice a year and the administrative costs are borne by the CoR. The JCCs prepare the ground, on the sub-national level, for these countries to become members of the EU and for the local authorities to therefore become members of the CoR. The work covers various policy fields with the objective to share best practice and promote adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*. Through this channel the SCTM tries to improve the local government participation in EU integration and processes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although the EU opened negotiations with Albania in July 2022, the JCC for Albania has not been established yet because there is almost no opposition to the national

NALAS works very closely with the CoR, mostly to contribute to conferences and events. The CoR's representative we interviewed confirmed that the relationship with NALAS is very useful because NALAS supplies very quickly information about the laws of a number of countries from the region it represents. The Brussels-based meetings of the JCCs, and the CoR's Working Groups that cover countries without JCCs, are all sub-events of the Enlargement Day, the largest annual event dedicated to EU enlargement from an LRA angle. NALAS and national associations of local authorities from Western Balkans enlargement countries are regular participants and contributors. The CoR, clearly, follows the general EU line and focuses on policy dialogue and sharing of best practices, it does not make strategic-geopolitical decisions concerning enlargement, e.g. in relation to Kosovo, but engages with local authorities from all EU candidate countries including the "potential candidate" Kosovo. Further enlargement due to new countries applying to join the EU has widened the focus of the CoR from solely the Western Balkans to these other countries as well. Turkey was already part of the CoR's activities, but the CoR is now increasingly cooperating with Ukraine and Moldova as well, and to an extent with Georgia.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

The paper analysed and discussed the engagement of SELRAs with the EU. The study is based on information obtained from semi-structured interviews of representatives of associations of SELRAs and other actors (NALAS, CoR, and European Commission). The results show that SELRAs are especially concerned with the implementation of European policies and that is why they are particularly interested in sustainable development, urban environment, utilities, social services, and culture. To strengthen their capabilities (including the ability to implement EU policy), SELRAs from non-EU member states are interested in obtaining pre-accession funds, while SELRAs from EU member states focus on cohesion policy.

Neither SELRAs from EU countries nor those from non-EU countries are especially active in lobbying with EU institutions, but the former are more active in supplying information to the EU. This is particularly common for

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government at the local level. Cooperation with Albania is pursued at the WG level which does not include diverse political actors in charge of specific cooperation programmes.



SELRAs having their representative offices in Brussels given that physical presence is essential for this type of activity. Associations of SELRAs also have a special role in supplying information from the EU to local authorities and networking with LRAs from across the EU. This is especially important for strengthening the voice of SELRAs at the EU level. This study showed that NALAS, which is a unique region-wide organisation that brings together all the analysed national associations of SELRAs with the exception of AUMS, has a special role in providing support for these associations in their activities vis-à-vis the EU.

All the studied organisations emphasise the weakness of the existing channels available to local self-government authorities to approach EU institutions. More channels of communication are available to SELRAs from EU member states, although SELRAs from non-EU countries also attempt to influence European policies. LRAs from candidate countries have a special and important channel of communication through the Joint Consultative Committees (JCCs) of the CoR. These offer local units that are members of delegations the opportunity to interface directly with the EU (SCTM). This is probably the most successful way for SELRAs from non-EU countries to be heard in the EU (UMM).

NALAS is recognised as an important representative of local authorities in South-East Europe, both by SELRAs and EU institutions. Since it is focused on local and regional issues and has direct channels of communication with the EU, as well as the ability to influence EU policies (as the examples provided demonstrate), it seems that in the current circumstances it represents the best instrument for SELRAs to communicate with the EU and to attempt to influence EU policies. Unlike national governments that are dominated by party-politics, NALAS is not a party-political institution and therefore it could be expected that it independently promotes the best interests of SELRAs.

Representative offices in Brussels are a further channel of communication with the EU and they provide added value in that respect, but their role in relation to the analysed countries is more about promotion of the represented regions, and less about influencing EU policies. Due to the high cost of having a representative office, and the limited ability to influence EU policy through lobbying, most interviewed participants do not see special benefits in this kind of organisation in Brussels.

When it comes to cooperation with national governments in approaching the EU, cooperation takes place when the interests of SELRAs are aligned with those of national governments. In those cases, it is easier for SELRAs to

convey their interests to EU institutions. However, this is not always the case, therefore they find support in their associations and NALAS.

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## Appendix 1. List of abbreviations

AAM	Association of Albanian Municipalities
ACRC	Association of Cities in the Republic of Croatia
AMTS	Association of Municipalities and Towns of Slovenia
AUMS	Association of Urban Municipalities of Slovenia
CALM	Congress of Local Authorities from Moldova
CCA	Croatian County Association
CEMR	Council of European Municipalities and Regions
CIVEX	Commission for Citizenship, Governance, Institutional and External Affairs
CoR	European Committee of the Regions
CPMR	Conference of Peripheral and Maritime Regions
DG NEAR	Directorate General Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations
DNC	Dubrovnik-Neretva County (Croatia)
EEAS	European External Action Service
EP	European Parliament
IPA II	Instrument of Pre-accession Assistance II
JCC	Joint Consultative Committee with the CoR
LRAs	Local and regional authorities
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MLG	Multi-level governance
NALAS	Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe
RCC	Regional Cooperation Council
SBS	Slavonija, Baranja and Srijem (Croatia)
SCTM	Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (Serbia)
SELRAs	Local and regional authorities from South East Europe
UCLG	United Cities and Local Governments
UMM	Union of Municipalities of Montenegro

## Appendix 2. List of questions used for the semi-structured interviews with national associations of local and regional authorities from South East Europe.

Preliminary questions for participant organisations:

1. What is the size of this organisation? How many employees?
2. What is the volume of EU related activities – how many working hours per week are dedicated to EU related activities? How many employees deal with EU related activities? What is the part of EU related activities in the overall volume of activities your organisation performs?

3. Specifically for Brussels-based offices: when was the office established and why?

Core questions:

1. Could you please indicate the EU policy areas on which you focus your interventions as an organisation or as an individual MEP?
2. Which objectives do you specifically pursue on the EU level?
3. Which of the following activities do you perform in relation to the EU:
  - Lobbying
  - Supplying information to the local authorities
  - Supplying information to the EU
  - Networking with LRAs from other countries
  - Promoting the image of the locality/region
  - Facilitating applications for EU funding
  - Other
4. Could you please describe the importance of each of these different strands of activity?
5. What are the channels of communication between the EU and the local/regional level? Is it consultation of SELRAs by EU institutions or, vice versa, SELRAs approaching the institutions? Is there direct communication between the local/regional authorities and the EU or communication through national bodies or national/regional associations of SELRAs?
6. Do you cooperate with your national government on pursuing the political objectives of your organisations or do you bypass the national government? Could you please explain why the one or the other?

## ENGAGEMENT WITH THE EU BY LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES FROM SOUTH EAST EUROPE

### *Summary*

*This article applies MLG theory to the study of engagement of local and regional authorities from South East Europe with the EU. It identifies the EU policies that impact the local and regional authorities from the region. This is a reliable predictor of the areas in which they are likely to engage with the EU. The article also identifies the various epiphanies of this engagement. Local and regional authorities from South East Europe engage with the EU through their own national associations but also through the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS). This is a region-wide organisation of which all the national associations of local and regional authorities from South East Europe are members. Lobbying with EU institutions does not play a big role for the local and regional authorities from South East Europe. These authorities, however, both those from EU and those from non-EU countries, attempt to influence EU policy through the national governments and, where the interests of the national government are not aligned with those of sub-national authorities, through the regional network NALAS or other channels, such as European networks of local and regional authorities, the Committee of the Regions, and Brussels-based representation offices. These offices are limited in number and size due to their high cost and the limited benefits they generate, e.g., in terms of impact on policy. The study evidences a different approach to engagement with the EU in EU and non-EU countries from South East Europe. Whilst NALAS creates momentum around the interests of local and regional authorities from South East Europe, its existence also reveals the relative weakness of these sub-national authorities that, due to their limited powers and resources, are unable to engage with the EU directly and must do so through NALAS, European networks, the CoR or, where viable, the national governments.*

*Keywords: local and regional authorities, South East Europe, European Union, NALAS, multi-level governance*

## ANGAŽMAN LOKALNIH I REGIONALNIH JEDINICA JUGOISTOČNE EUROPE U EUROPSKOJ UNIJI

### Sažetak

*U ovom radu teorija višerazinskog upravljanja primjenjuje se na istraživanje angažmana lokalnih i regionalnih vlasti jugoistočne Europe u Europskoj uniji. Istraživanje obuhvaća identifikaciju politika EU-a koje najviše utječu na lokalne i regionalne vlasti u predmetnoj regiji, a koje predstavljaju pouzdan prediktor područja njihova vjerojatnog angažmana u EU-u. Nadalje, u radu se identificiraju različiti pojavni oblici tog angažmana. Lokalne i regionalne vlasti jugoistočne Europe angažiraju se u EU-u posredstvom svojih nacionalnih udruga, ali i putem Mreže udruga lokalnih vlasti jugoistočne Europe (NALAS). Riječ je o regionalnoj organizaciji čiji su članovi sve nacionalne udruge lokalnih i regionalnih vlasti jugoistočne Europe. Lobiranje institucija EU-a ne igra veliku ulogu za lokalne i regionalne vlasti jugoistočne Europe. Međutim, lokalne i regionalne vlasti jugoistočne Europe, kako one članica EU-a, tako i one u zemljama koje nisu članice EU-a, nastoje utjecati na politike EU-a posredstvom nacionalnih vlada. U slučaju kada interesi nacionalne vlade nisu usklađeni s interesima subnacionalnih vlasti, utjecaj se nastoji izvršiti putem regionalne mreže NALAS ili putem drugih kanala kao što su Europska mreža lokalnih i regionalnih vlasti, Europski odbor regija ili predstavnički uredi u Briselu. S obzirom na visoke troškove i ograničene benefite koje ured donosi, primjerice utjecaj na europske politike, njihov je broj i veličina ograničen. Istraživanje je pokazalo da se lokalne i regionalne vlasti u zemljama članicama EU-a drugačije angažiraju u EU-u od lokalnih i regionalnih vlasti u zemljama koje nisu članice EU-a. Dok NALAS predstavlja značajan faktor kada je riječ o interesu lokalnih i regionalnih vlasti jugoistočne Europe, njegovo postojanje ukazuje na relativnu slabost tih subnacionalnih vlasti koje se zbog svoje ograničene snage i resursa ne mogu izravno angažirati u EU-u, nego to čine posredstvom NALAS-a, europskih mreža, Europskog odbora regija ili, kada je to moguće, nacionalnih vlada.*

*Ključne riječi: lokalne i regionalne jedinice, jugoistočna Europa, Europska unija, NALAS, višerazinsko upravljanje*