

Local Autonomy in Central and Eastern European (CEE) Countries in Comparative Perspective: Observations, Trends and Potential Implications on Democratic Governance

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Abstract

In recent decades, local autonomy has become an increasingly valued feature of local government, advocated by many European and international institutions as a key tool of good governance. Despite this widespread trend, there has been a variety of divergent views in the literature on the meaning of local autonomy and how it can be measured. This paper focuses on local autonomy through 2 different perspectives. First, it considers the decision-making freedom of local government as a “freedom from” higher levels of government and proposes 7 dimensions of it. Applied to 27 Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries part of the Local Autonomy Index 2.0 project, the comparison of administrative profiles (2015-2020) shows for example that CEE countries have similar levels of autonomy across all dimensions except for financial autonomy where they score lower compared to the overall Council of Europe (CoE) member states. The tracking of trends of local autonomy in the CEE countries from 1990 to 2020 shows that a large proportion of them were conferred a low degree of autonomy at the time of independence from their former political configuration (the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia). They then launched decentralisation reforms, often coinciding with the ratification of the European Charter of Local-Self Government. Some countries have since then launched recentralisation reforms. Second, the normative claims on local autonomy are questioned by considering local autonomy as the “freedom to” have an impact on government efficiency and democracy. Here we expand our design to include all Council of Europe member states, as they share similar Charter-incentivised tendencies to increase autonomy. The empirical results of regression analyses show a positive relationship between local autonomy and some indicators of input and output legitimacy respectively, leading to more global conclusions about the real impacts of local autonomy.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, local autonomy has become an increasingly valued feature of local government, advocated by many European and international institutions as a key tool in achieving good governance. Despite this widespread trend, there has been a variety of divergent views in the literature on the meaning of local autonomy and how it can be measured. Against this background, the Local Autonomy Index project was launched in 2015 to create a comprehensive measure of local autonomy for European countries and report changes from 1990 to 2014. The multi-dimensional codebook developed went beyond recording the share of funds managed by local authorities and captured to what extent these have a say in how these funds are spent (Ladner et al. 2015). Applied to 39

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countries in Europe, it enables to analyse local autonomy by groups of countries. In the article of 2016, Ladner, Keuffer and Baldersheim grouped the countries according to geographical and cultural criteria and revealed that the degree of autonomy (in 2014, for 11 variables) was very different across the groups: Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) globally enjoyed the highest degree of local autonomy, whereas the 17 covered Central and Eastern European countries (CEE)³ scored lower on each dimensions. The results also emphasised that not all groups of countries were equally homogeneous, with CEE countries being one of the particularly heterogeneous ones (Ladner et al 2016, 338).

The Local Autonomy Index project proposed a multidimensional measure of autonomy for the comparison of many European countries and considered the concept not as a positive value in itself, but rather as means of achieving desirable democratic and functional aims. Testing empirically the expected effects of local autonomy has only been seldom carried out in the literature (King and Stoker 1996). One of the other the added values of the project was to consider many CEE countries instead of indistinctly consider them as being part of the same region. Indeed, Swianiewicz (2014) shows the great existing variation of local government systems within the Eastern European region. After describing the most widely used typologies of European local government systems (Page and Goldsmith 1987, Hesse and Sharpe 1991, Loughlin et al. 2010), he concludes that the attempts to include the Eastern part of the continent were far from comprehensive or satisfactory and regrouped 19 countries of the CEE region in 5 different types relying of the criteria used in the existing classifications (Swianiewicz 2014, 303).

This paper aims at pursuing the study of local government systems and autonomy focusing more specifically on the CEE countries, relying on the data produced within the Local Autonomy Index project. These have been considered as the most robust and valid measure available at the local level (Harguindéguy et al. 2021). The created index being extensively used and cited by scholars as well as practitioners, it warranted a second project, namely the “LAI 2.0”, to refine, update, and increase the number of countries covered (Ladner et al. 2023). The LAI 2.0 keeps the same methodology, relying on local experts to define the accurate units of aggregation and of analysis and to collect data, and covers 27 CEE countries, from 1990 to 2020 – apart from certain countries which gained independence after 1990, in these cases their data starts from an ulterior date (see Table 1).

It is interesting to look more particularly at the CEE countries, because a large proportion of them conferred a low degree of autonomy to their local governments at the time of their independence from the Soviet Union. From the 1990s onwards, some countries launched decentralisation reforms, following the adoption of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (thereafter: the Charter). This international legal instrument was adopted in 1985 by the Council of Europe to ensure the protection, evaluation, and promotion of the principles of decentralisation and local autonomy (Council of Europe 1985). To underline the dynamism of the Central and Eastern European context, let us add, drawing from other results, that some countries have also recently launched re-centralisation reforms (Ladner et al. 2023).

Subsequently, this paper addresses the 3 following research questions (RQ):

³ For the grouping, the CEE countries were divided as follows: the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania); the Central Eastern countries (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia); the Balkan countries (Albania, Croatia and Serbia), the Eastern countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Moldova and Romania) and the Black Sea countries (Ukraine, Georgia and Turkey) (Ladner et al. 2016, 349).

1. What is the current state of local autonomy in the CEE countries from a comparative perspective, i.e. across European regions and between eras within the Central and Eastern European region?
2. What are the developments in local autonomy in the CEE countries between 1990 and 2020?
3. What are the potential implications of a higher degree of local autonomy on democratic governance?

To answer these questions, this paper begins by explaining the theoretical insights of local autonomy in the literature. Then, it describes the method and data used. The result part is divided between the observations (RQ 1), the trends (RQ 2) and the potential implications (RQ 3) of local autonomy. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings of the paper and discusses its main limits and paths for future research.

Table 1: Units of aggregation, name and number of local governments, and affiliation in European organisation of the 27 CEE countries covered in the LAI 2.0 project.

CEE Country in the LAI 2.0	Unit of aggregation	Name of local government (LG)	Number of LG (2020)	Affiliation in CoE and EU	Charter ratification year	First year covered
Albania	Country	Bashkia	61	CoE	2000	1992
Armenia	Various LG (municipalities and capital city)	Hamaynk	2477	CoE	2002	1996
Belarus	Various LG (municipalities and cities)	Raion and Oblast	226			1990
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Republika Srpska, District Brcko and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina which includes 10 federal units	Opština	3181	CoE	2002	1996
Bulgaria	Country	Obshtina	482	EU, CoE	1995	1990
Croatia	Various LG (municipalities and cities)	Općina and Grad	518	EU, CoE	1998	1990
Cyprus	Various LG (municipalities and communities)	δήμοι	2094	EU, CoE	1988	1990
Czech Republic	Country	Obec	2637	EU, CoE	1999	1990
Estonia	Country	Parishes and urban municipalities	72	EU, CoE	1995	1990
Georgia	Country	Municipaliteti	345	CoE	2005	1990
Greece	Country	Dimos	556	EU, CoE	1990	1990
Hungary	Country	Települések	78	EU, CoE	1994	1990
Kosovo	Country	Komuna, Opština	8131			2000
Latvia	Country	Novads	310	EU, CoE	1997	1991
Lithuania	Country	Savivaldybė	64	EU, CoE	1999	1990
Malta	Country	Kunsill Lokali	3178	EU, CoE	1994	1993
Montenegro	Country	Opština	2202	CoE	2009	1990
North Macedonia	Country	Opštini	332	CoE	1997	1990
Poland	Various LG (municipalities and cities)	Gminy and Powiat	7904	EU, CoE	1994	1990
Republic of Moldova	Country	Raion	69	CoE	1998	1990
Romania	Country	Comune	38	EU, CoE	1998	1992
Russian Federation	Various LG (settlements, urban obrags and federal cities)	муниципалитеты	9525	CoE (during data)	1998	1990

				collection)		
Serbia	Various LG (municipalities, cities and capital city)	Opštine, Gradovi and Belgrade	119	CoE	2008	1990
Slovak Republic	Country	Občin and Mestna občina	11	EU, CoE	2000	1990
Slovenia	Various LG (municipalities and cities)	Občine	60	EU, CoE	1997	1990
Türkiye	Various LG (municipalities, metropolitan cities and metropolitan within metropolitan cities)	Belediye	2479	CoE	1993	1990
Ukraine	Various LG (3 types of municipalities and new one since 2015)	Sela, Selyshcha, Amalgamated Hromadas, Misfa	898	CoE	1998	1991

Note: Azerbaijan is missing because of political conflict at the moment of data collection.

2. Theoretical Considerations

2.1 Local Autonomy as “Freedom From” Higher Levels of Government

Local autonomy has gained more value as a feature of local government, supported by many European and international institutions as an essential aspect of good governance and decentralisation (e.g. UCLG 2008, OECD 2004). Despite this widespread trend, there has been a variety of divergent views in the literature on the meaning of local autonomy and how it can be measured (Goldsmith 1990, Vetter 2007), which has – among other things – to do with its various theoretical insights.

According to Pratchett (2004), local autonomy can be apprehended through 3 different perspectives, depending on the institutional level observed and the questions asked. Firstly, local autonomy is understood as a relative concept and defined as the independence of local government in relation to the constraints existing in its environment. Thus, the degree of autonomy depends on the "freedom from" (Pratchett 2004, 363) such constraints, which can be vertical, when intergovernmental relations are involved, and horizontal, when local factors are concerned (Gurr and King 1987). Local autonomy is traditionally considered in its vertical relationship to the State. According to Marcou (1999), it is used to describe the position claimed by a local government vis-à-vis the central government and, as it is established within the State, it is at the same time defined by the State. Representative of this approach, Clark (1984) defines local autonomy through initiation and immunity: Initiation is the competence of local authorities to carry out tasks in their own interest; Immunity means the ability of a local authority to act without being under the control of higher levels of government.

In this perspective, the concept of local autonomy and the different dimensions developed in the literature to measure its degree were used as criteria to differentiate systems of local government in Europe in a comparative perspective. One of the most popular typologies of European local government system is the one developed by Page and Goldsmith (1987). Based on the three-dimensional analysis of central-local relations – allocation of functions, discretion, and access of local government – their research distinguishes between southern and northern European systems among seven countries. To understand what impacts the significant changes that have occurred over the last 20 years in Europe has on central-local government relations, the three dimensions have been applied

to the seven countries covered in 1987 as well as seven other countries including federalist and eastern ones (Goldsmith and Page 2010).⁴ The analysis shows that the North-South distinction no longer offers a good categorisation of the current systems of central-local government relations. The cross-country comparisons also highlight that the framework of functions access and discretion is too simple to capture the multilevel nature that characterises the present-day central-local relations, which is even more complex in the federal systems (Goldsmith and Page 2010).

Another well-known typology of local government systems using political, structural, and functional criteria distinguishes between three different groups of Western industrialised democracies (Hesse and Sharpe 1991). French, Italian, Belgian, Spanish, Portuguese and to some extent Greek municipalities are placed in the “Napoleonic model”, where local government is characterised by its constitutional status, its role is primarily political rather than functional and all its activities are subject to a strong control. Local government systems belonging to the “Anglo group”⁵ do not enjoy constitutional status. However, they are more autonomous regarding day-to-day operations due to their relationship with the central government being of non-tutelage. But the central control can be changed by the centre itself. The last group brings together local government systems of countries from northern and central Europe.⁶ These countries have some similarities regarding the relationship between the central power and local governments. Because local governments in this category perform a wide range of functions, have a large financial independence, and receive a strong constitutional status, their level of local autonomy is the highest (Hesse and Sharpe 1991, 603f).

In order to better take into account the significant changes in legal systems and managerial models that occurred in many countries in the 1990s after the collapse of communism, the globalisation of the economy and the massive enlargement of the European Union, Loughlin et al. (2010) created a new typology, covering some of the Eastern European countries. Based on criteria such as the constitutional position of local governments, state-society relations, the basis of policy style, and the form of decentralisation, the authors identify the following four models: the Franco model of Southern Europe, the Anglo-Saxon model, the Germanic model of Central Europe, and the Nordic model. All the 10 Eastern European countries covered⁷ are grouped into one type, since they share a common experience of communist dictatorship, which imposes a high degree of centralisation, and have only recently opened up to the transition to democracy and its prerequisites (Loughlin et al. 2010).

These well-established typologies of European local government systems give a good insight of their variations. However, they are limited to a description of the state; they do not consider differences within these big regions and even less to existing variations inside a country. Based on these conclusions, Swianiewicz (2014) offers a comprehensive picture of the variation within the CEE countries, relying on the four following indicators: territorial organisation (number of tiers of elected local and regional governments and territorial fragmentation), functional decentralisation, financial discretion of local governments (financial decentralisation, the shape of the grant allocation system, and local government debt as a percentage of GDP), and horizontal power relations (the

⁴ Countries covered in the study of 1987: Denmark, Sweden, Italy, France, Norway, UK, and Spain; Countries added in 2010: Netherlands, Hungary, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium.

⁵ United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Canada, Australia, the US and New Zealand.

⁶ Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands.

⁷ The Visegrád States: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia; the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania; The Balkan States: Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania.

position of the mayor in the municipal government and the electoral system of the local council). On this basis, he suggests a first attempt at a typology of 19 countries in the region, which reflects significant variations of local government systems within the group of eastern European countries (Swianiewicz 2014, 305):

- Type I: Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia
- Type II: Czech Republic, Estonia, and Latvia
- Type III: Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Slovenia, and Ukraine
- Type IV: Georgia, Lithuania, and Serbia
- Type V: Armenia and Azerbaijan.

In the Local Autonomy Index project, we conceive local autonomy as a core feature of local government. Despite its importance, there was a consensus in the literature that there was no theory or definition of local autonomy (e.g. Page 1982). In a first book (Ladner et al. 2019), we highlighted that local autonomy lies at the crossroads of different disciplines approaching the concept through specific dimensions or by combining them very differently and we relied on these various approaches and disciplines to propose a theory-based and multidimensional concept of local autonomy. Based on our numerical, scalar, and longitudinal measurement, we also took the endeavour to build a typology of local government⁸, by trying to go beyond the existing ones: instead of a qualitative and categorical, on a more quantitative and discrete approach; instead of assuming a strong degree of homogeneity in the CEE countries, integrating them. The empirical typologies based on the LAI is based on three time points (2014, 2004 and 1990) and two most significant dimensions: political discretion and financial autonomy. The scale of both dimensions is divided into three classes, which allows to distinguish between nine types (Ladner et al. 2019, 267).⁹ CEE countries are distributed among 5 out of the 9 types, which rather indicated heterogeneity among them. Interestingly, they are strongly under-represented among the countries that remained in the same type throughout the whole period from 1990 to 2014, showing a great dynamism.

In the LAI 2.0, extending beyond European countries, the logic is more inductive, as we rely on the created theory-based concept of local autonomy to develop the dimensions of local autonomy (Ladner et al. 2023). We distinguish between the following seven dimensions of local autonomy:

- 1) Legal autonomy: the legal status and protection of local authorities within the state;
- 2) Access: the degree of influence of local authorities on political decisions at higher levels of government
- 3) Policy scope: the range of functions for which local authorities are responsible;
- 4) Political discretion: the range of functions over which local authorities have a say and whether they enjoy a general competence clause;
- 5) Financial autonomy: the financial resources of local authorities and the possibility to decide on their sources;

⁸ As we focus on local autonomy, we stressed that our typology is not a comprehensive typology of local government systems, as it disregards the position of other subnational tiers, the horizontal power relations and the territorial organisation (Ladner et al 2019, 264).

⁹ Type I (high political discretion and high financial autonomy) is called “partnership” of central and local governments ; Type V (high political discretion and low financial autonomy) is called “chained democracy”; Type VI (low political discretion and high financial autonomy) is called “guided democracy”; Type IX (low political discretion and low financial autonomy) is called “tutelle” (as in the traditional French Napoleonic system, that is, as an extensive form of supervision through tutelage).

- 6) Organisational autonomy: the free organisation of local political systems and administrations;
- 7) Non-interference: the extent of liberty left by higher levels of government in their control of local authorities.

The LAI 2.0 gives us the possibility not to increase the depth, as the dimensions and aspects included in our measurement as broadly the same as in the previous project, but the scope of the studies dealing with local government system autonomy in CEE countries, as it covers 27 of them, from 1990 to 2020. The extensive dataset also provides the chance to empirically test the normatively expected positive implications of local autonomy.

2.1 Local Autonomy as “Freedom To” Have an Impact on the Daily Life of the Citizens

The second theoretical conception of local autonomy is the “freedom to approach” (Pratchett 2004, 364) and refers to the interpretation of Wolman and Goldsmith (1992, 45): “Conventionally local autonomy is defined as the discretion local governments possess to act, free from control by higher levels of governments. The usage here is much different. Local autonomy is defined as the ability of local governments to have an independent impact on the well-being of their citizens”. The authors also consider that local autonomy offers potential to local government, which is constrained by a set of laws, political factors, and socio-economic conditions. However, they go further by analysing the capacity of local government to undertake particular activities in the interests of citizens. It is the actual consequences and underlying normative logics of local autonomy that are highlighted, without considering local autonomy as a positive value in itself. Applying this analytical concept to compare local government in the United States and the UK, the fundamental question posed by Wolman and Goldsmith (1990, 3) is: “Do local governments in urban areas have autonomy in the sense that their presence and activities have independent impacts on anything important? Does urban politics matter?”. This perspective adds to the more formal aspect discussed above the effective capacity of local government to act and insists on its social relevance.

In normative terms, local autonomy is the justification for all democratic local government. Indeed, if local governments do not have their own sphere of authority to determine of their own accord, by themselves and for themselves, the services that correspond to the demands, needs, and problems of their citizens, as well as the rates of taxation to have the resources necessary to provide them, then they amount to armed arms of the central state and there is no point in electing local authorities (Goldsmith 1995). It goes in the same direction as the Charter, whose aim “presupposes the existence of local authorities endowed with democratically constituted decision-making bodies and enjoying a large measure of autonomy as regards their powers, the ways in which they are exercised and the means necessary for the accomplishment of their mission” (Council of Europe 1985, preamble).

The existence of a “policy space for local democracy” (Ladner et al. 2016, 325) makes it possible to distinguish between locally administered tasks, for which local government provides and implements services defined and designed by higher levels of government, and tasks for which local government has the autonomy to design services in the way it deems most appropriate. This “dual function of local government” (Pierre 1990, 38) – as a vehicle of local democracy on the one hand, and as a local implementing agent of the state apparatus on the other – can also be seen as the two essential parts of the local policy-making process. Indeed, Easton (1953) first made the distinction between the input into the political system, i.e. the votes, demands or interests of citizens, and the output, i.e. the actual decisions and actions of governments. Drawing on Easton's systemic model, Scharpf (1970)

defines output-oriented legitimacy as the ability to govern effectively on behalf of the people, and input-oriented legitimacy as taking account of the needs expressed by the people through their political participation. Based on all the arguments mentioned above, one can assume that the higher the level of local autonomy, the higher the level of quality of democratic participation (input-legitimacy) and the higher the level of efficiency of delivered outcomes (output-legitimacy).

It is worth finally mentioning that Pratchett (2004) presents a third theoretical insight on local autonomy. This considers it as a bottom-up phenomenon in which local governments have more or less “the capacity to define and express local identities through political activity” (Pratchett 2004, 366). This perspective emphasises the values of commitment, independence, and emotional attachment, and focuses on the activities that the local community deploys to control the social construction of place and define its own differences. Local autonomy is understood here through the prism of power relations and considered more as a complex relational construction than as something static granted or possessed by a local government (DeFilippis 1999).

3. Methodology

3.1 Operationalisation and Data

In this paper, our entire focus is on local autonomy, observing the dynamics and trends of autonomy itself and then the possible implications on various elements pertaining to democratic governance. Our main data therefore stems from the Local Autonomy Index 2.0, whether we are looking at the overall index (LAI), which provides a global score for each country¹⁰, or specifically at one of the seven, weighted dimensions that compose said index, as explained above. Besides the actual values of the LAI and its dimensions, we also use the country profiles that accompany the coding sheets and that have been elaborated by the country experts involved in the project (Ladner et al. 2021). The dataset also includes information on population size and number of local governments per year and country, which are used to calculate mean size of local governments, a key control variable for further analysis. All scores related to the seven dimensions and the LAI have been standardised to a 0-100 scale for facilitated comparison across figures and tables.

As was introduced, we also investigate the assumptions that higher levels of autonomy could positively influence elements of input- and output-related aspects of democratic legitimacy. Input-legitimacy may include aspects such as political participation and the satisfaction with and quality of democracy, which we consider in our research. Output-legitimacy may encompass tangible outcomes such as effective delivery of public services, economic prosperity, and welfare of citizens (Beetham 1991, Scharpf 1999). To this end, some externally sources datasets have been combined into our research, which allows us to delve into potential linkages between local autonomy and democratic governance, more precisely elements related to input- and output-legitimacy of political systems. First, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2022) provides a comprehensive measure of democracy covering a wide range of political institutions, electoral processes, civil liberties, and other aspects of democracy. V-Dem offers a nuanced understanding of democracy by capturing variations in democratic practices

¹⁰ For the formula on the construction of the LAI, see Ladner et al. 2023.

across different countries and over time. It includes indicators such as electoral integrity, freedom of expression, civil society participation, and government accountability. Second, the World Governance Indicators (WGIs) are a set of aggregate governance indicators produced by the World Bank (Kaufmann and Kraay 2023). They measure six dimensions of governance, three of which are closely related to aspects of input- and output-related legitimacy, pertaining to participation, effectiveness, and regulatory quality.

Third, the Democracy Barometer is a dataset that provides a multidimensional measure of democracy, assessing both the quality and level of democracy in different countries (Engler et al. 2020). It includes indicators such as electoral participation, civil liberties, political participation, government performance, and the quality of democratic institutions. Fourth, Claassen's dataset on Satisfaction with Democracy (Claassen and Magalhães 2022), covering 132 countries over the span of 50 years, provides a highly relevant and complementary resource to the other datasets also covering democratic governance and hereby considered. Finally, the World Happiness Report is an annual publication by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network that ranks countries based on their levels of happiness and well-being (Helliwell et al. 2021). The World Happiness Index aims to provide insights into the factors that contribute to happiness and well-being around the world, helping policymakers understand how to promote the happiness of their citizens, in line with the approach of Wolman and Goldsmith (1992). Finally, we also use GDP per capita values, sourced from International Monetary Fund data (International Monetary Fund 2024).

3.2 Methods

Having laid out the data used, the following section outlines the methods used for our various analyses and presentation of results. For our first descriptive section (observations), we start by comparing different dynamics of local autonomy by highlighting the various configurations of its seven underlying dimensions. These results are presented both for CEE countries and CoE member states. CoE member states make sense as an analytical group, mainly because of its membership requiring the ratification and implementation of the Charter. The Charter can be considered the most large-scale endeavour in promoting and realising local autonomy and more general decentralisation efforts. It is comprised of 18 articles, and a minimum of 20 paragraphs (at least 10 from the restrictive selection of 14 articles/paragraphs) must be ratified by (prospective) member states (Ladner et al. 2019: 7). Furthermore, a monitoring mechanism is enacted since 1995 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, ensuring the proper implementation of the Charter, notably by way of recommendations. Adopting the Charter therefore guarantees a certain degree of autonomy, and these are interesting dynamics to highlight in the CEE area where these ratifications took place during our observation period.

Further, we detail these results according to multiple country groupings. First, we use Swianiewicz's (2014) typology, whose 5 types are mentioned in the theoretical considerations section above. The second grouping is more oriented towards traditional geographically determined areas. The 27 CEE countries have been divided into the following six regional areas, relative to their positioning in the CEE area or based on conventional designated names (albeit under constant debate)¹¹:

¹¹ The categorisation of Eastern European countries into sub-regions is a highly discussed matter. For our research, we mostly reference categories according to Britannica and other encyclopaedic entries.

- Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia;
- Baltic countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania;
- Caucasus countries: Armenia, Georgia;
- Central Europe: Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovak Republic;
- Eastern Europe: Belarus, Russian Federation, Ukraine;
- Southern Europe: Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Türkiye.

Both the empirical and pragmatic ways of categorising CEE countries seem relevant as they display different dynamics and ways of presenting the same data. This is also relevant as to point out the diversity of an area which for years has been presented under umbrella nomenclatures such as “post-communist” or “former Soviet” states. While on the topic of heterogeneity, this is examined inside said country groupings by observing standard deviation values. These initial observations are based on the mean values from 2015 to 2020. This corresponds to the period for which the update of the LAI was conducted (Ladner et al., 2021, 2023).

The next descriptive section (trends) concentrates on developments over time. Here, the LAI data under scrutiny spans from 1990 to 2020, i.e. the entire period covered by the LAI 2.0 project, including both updated countries and newly added ones to the dataset (Ladner et al., 2021, 2023). This allows us to highlight more time-specific changes and to appraise the evolution of local autonomy over time. The trends are first presented for all CEE countries together per dimension. Then, we look at the evolution of the overall LAI for all CEE countries and compare it to the CoE member states combined group, before looking into the same trends according to the geographical and empirical (Swianiewicz 2014 typology) groupings presented above. These longitudinal results allow us to observe more specific time-variant dynamics, complemented by some contextual elements sourced from the country profiles that accompany and justify the coding performed by the LAI 2.0’s country experts (see Ladner et al. 2021). This allows to identify what kind of different events and reforms trigger changes in local autonomy.

In the analytical section (potential implications), to assess whether local autonomy matters on aspects of input- and output-legitimacy, we have decided on linear regression models using the LAI as the independent variable and the various indicators of legitimacy as the dependent variables. Here, 44¹² CoE member states are under scrutiny. As measurements relative to input-legitimacy, we have opted for quality of democracy from the V-Dem 12 dataset, Voice and Accountability, Satisfaction with democracy and finally effective political participation. On the output-legitimacy side, we will be using corruption, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, and finally happiness, which should cover a wide range of possible governance outcomes related to output-legitimacy. Having both four input-legitimacy and output-legitimacy dependent variables, this provides a rather broad but also balances assessment of ways in which local autonomy could positively influence democratic legitimacy.

Additionally, we will be using a certain amount of control variables to account for potentially relevant explanatory factors. First, the mean size of local governments accounts for eventual influence of local government size on

¹² In 2024, there are 46 CoE member states. In our database, Monaco and San Marino are missing as we failed to find a reliable local expert. At the time of LAI 2.0 coding (2021), the Russian Federation was still a member state.

input- and output-legitimacy, respectively through the lens of the “small-is-beautiful” and “large-is-lively” theories (Denters et al. 2014).

Our second control variable pertains to European Union (EU) membership or its absence among the countries under scrutiny. EU membership could indeed have significant implications for democratic governance, affecting both input- and output-legitimacy, through the adherence to more enhanced democratic standards, legal harmonisations that entice institutional reforms towards policy coherence, but also by both EU funding and monitoring, which could lead to increased capacity in upholding a higher quality of democratic and efficient governance, albeit highly varied across regions (Rose 2008).

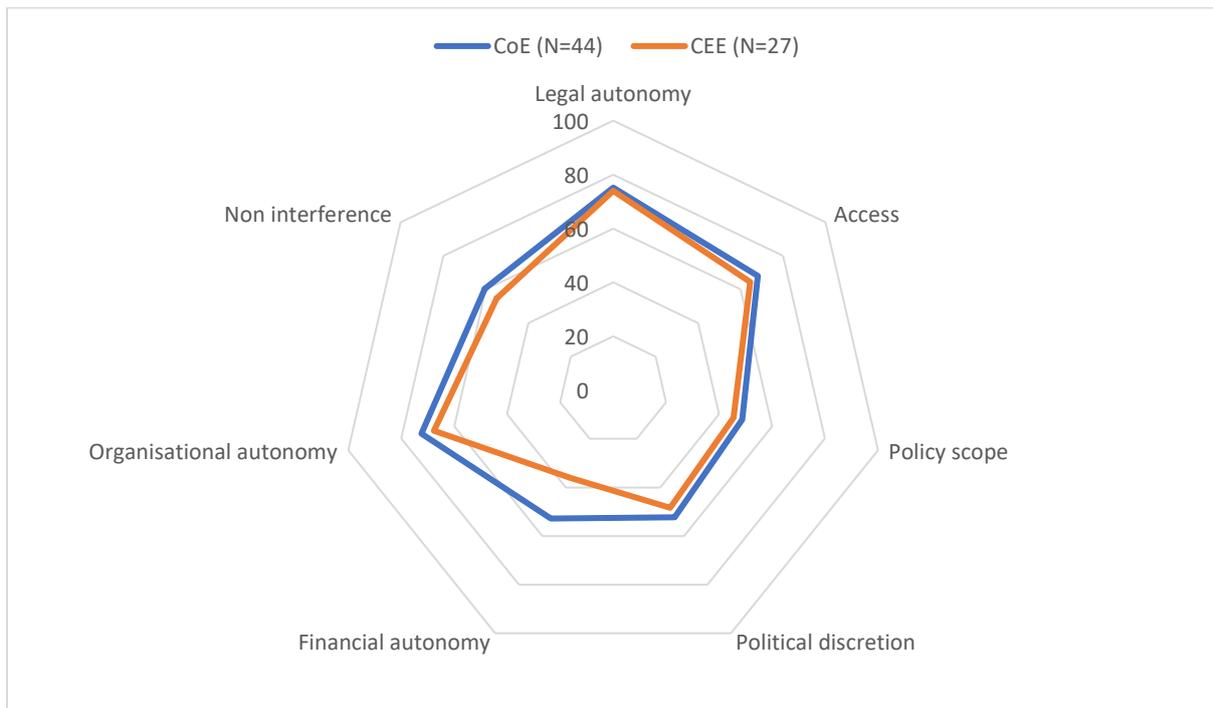
Finally, we control for GDP per capita, as higher economic levels can have significant influence on the entire array of legitimacy indicators examined in this paper. Indeed, higher GDP per capita often correlates with higher levels of education and resource availability among other phenomena, which respectively impacts civic engagement and improved service delivery (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2006).

4. Results

4.1 Observations

We begin our observations by highlighting the inter-comparison of local autonomy profiles in two major groups: CoE member states and CEE countries (our main area under scrutiny here). Figure 1 displays different patterns across the seven dimensions of local autonomy. Across all seven dimensions, no major differences seem to appear, apart from financial autonomy, where the CoE member states score around 15% higher than CEE states as overall groups. For the dimensions pertaining to organisational autonomy and non-interference, this difference is narrowed down to around 5%. CoE member states display a higher degree of autonomy than CEE countries, which can be related to both the adoption of the Charter, a requirement to CoE membership, but also due to differences in sample sizes. Indeed, the CoE member states as an analytical category in our paper, equally include Western European countries, which generally show higher degrees of local autonomy across all dimensions (Ladner et al. 2021). This is especially true for financial autonomy, which, as mentioned, shows a 15% difference between CoE member states, and CEE countries, the lower scoring group. Where the CoE member states group includes high-scoring countries such as Andorra, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Sweden, and Switzerland, all scoring in the 80-98 range, this automatically increases the group mean. Conversely, the CEE group harbors countries on the lower end of the scale, the majority under the 50-point mark. The group also includes non-CoE member states such as Belarus and Kosovo, both very low-scoring countries (30 points each on average from 2015 to 2020). This shows fiscal decentralisation still has a long way to go in the area. The otherwise very similar patterns for the four remaining dimensions warrant a more detailed look into CEE countries according to our two ways of groupings presented in previous sections.

Figure 1: Inter-comparison of local autonomy.

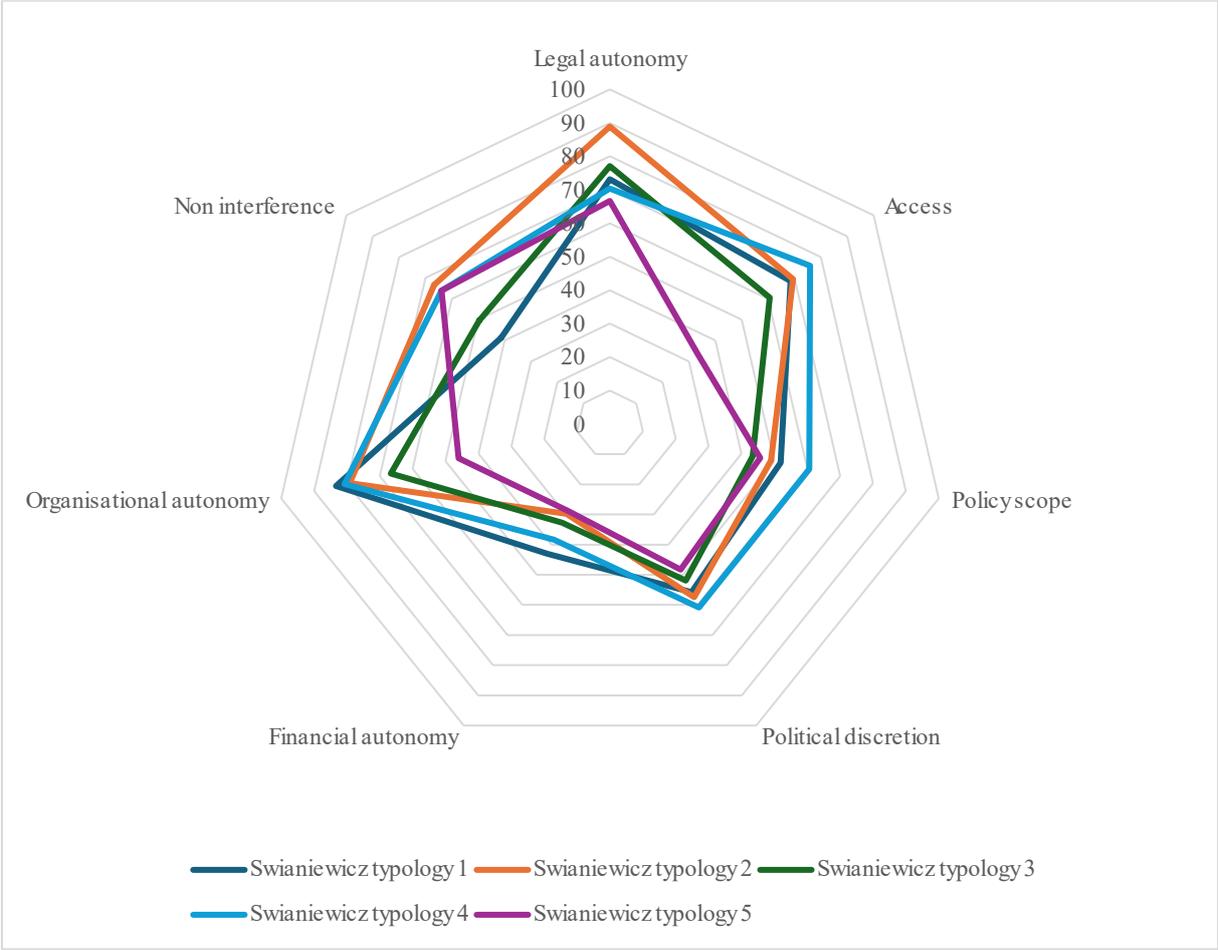


Legend: Seven dimensions of the LAI, CoE member states (N=44) and CEE countries (N=27), 2015-2020 mean values, standardised scores

Our first intra-comparison investigates a selection of CEE countries grouped according to Swianiewicz's (2014) typology of Eastern European local government systems (see Fig. 2). The five distinct groups display more varied patterns of local autonomy for all seven dimensions and therefore provides for a more interesting overview of the dynamics across CEE countries. In alignment with Swianiewicz's typology, Type 1 and 4 countries display the highest degree of financial autonomy. Considerable differences in scores can be observed, especially for the dimensions of access, organisational autonomy, and non-interference. It seems that scores related to self-rule¹³ are more homogeneous, whereas dimensions comprising values pertaining more to interactive rule have witnessed more diverging patterns of development. Referring to the theoretical perspective we adopt, the "freedom from" higher levels of government still remains a context-specific issue (e.g. Type 1 countries such as Hungary and Poland are facing recentralisation tendencies).

¹³ The extent to which local governments have authority over those who live in their territory (see Ladner et al. 2019: 46), as opposed to interactive rule, which refers to central-local relations and its power balance (Ladner et al. 2019, 340)

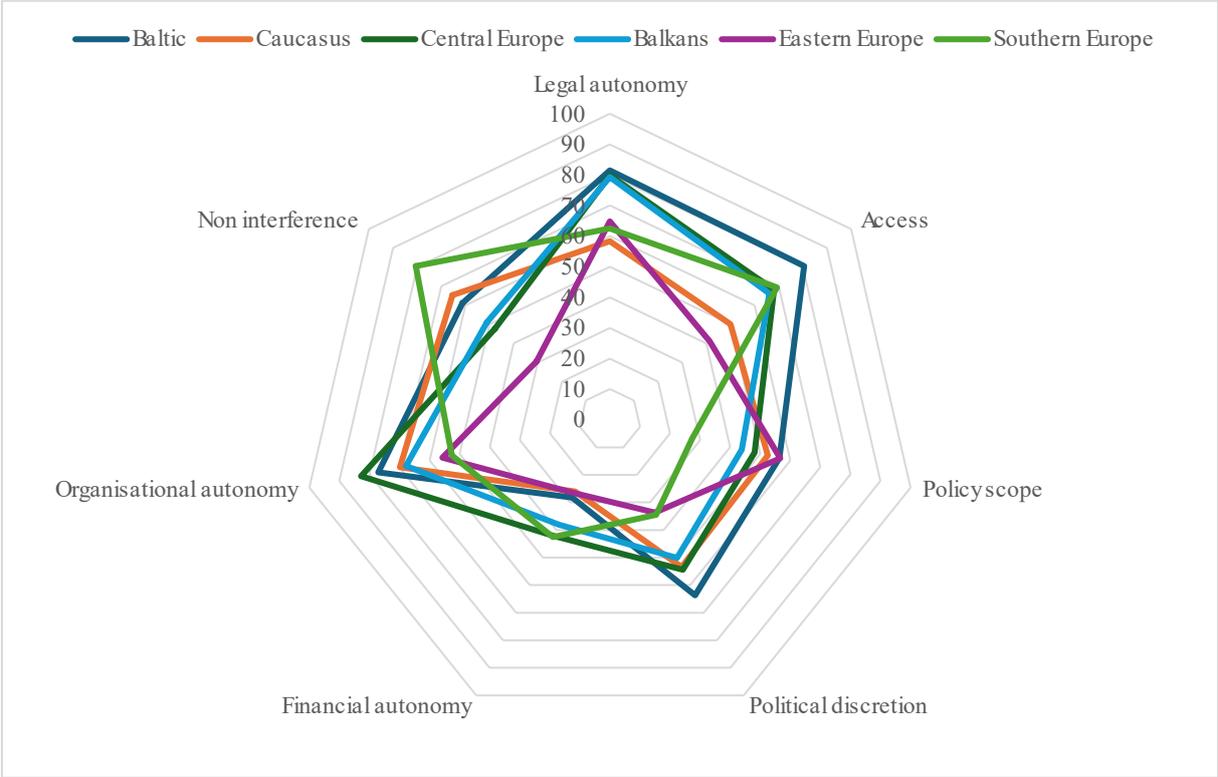
Figure 2: Intra-group comparison of local autonomy based on empirical typology.



Legend: Seven dimensions of the LAI, CEE countries divided according to the Swianiewicz (2014) typology, 5 types (N=19), 2015-2020 mean values, standardised scores.

To include a larger number of countries, and to present these observations as different patterns, we have opted for a more geographically determined division of CEE countries, as mentioned higher in the article, for an alternative perspective and intra-comparison. Figure 3 shows us how the seven dimensions of the LAI are articulated according to these regional areas. Figure 4 shows the same values, but the visualisation is presented in a different way, i.e. separating the CEE regional areas into their own graphs. These two figures paint a more detailed picture of the variety of dimensional configurations of local autonomy amongst CEE countries. The clearly different manifestations support the argument that the CEE area, from a decentralisation perspective, should not be considered as a general analytical category, as countries in the area have known various developments of local autonomy. For example, the Baltic states seem to have a propensity towards broader policy scope and higher political discretion in the area. The Eastern area (Belarus, Ukraine, Russian Federation) is almost consistently (besides policy scope) on the lower end of all dimensions, which could possibly be linked to recentralisation tendencies in the area, but also the geographical proximity and attachment as former Soviet countries. What we generally gather from both figures is a picture of elevated heterogeneity in the various patterns of local autonomy, which deserves a more targeted look.

Figure 3: Intra-comparison of local autonomy based on regional areas.



Legend: Seven dimensions of the LAI, CEE countries, divided in six regional areas (N=27), 2015-2020 mean values, standardised scores.

Figure 4: Intra-comparison of local autonomy per regional area in separated spider diagrams.



Legend: Seven dimensions of the LAI, CEE countries, divided in six regional areas (N=27), 2015-2020 mean values, standardised scores.

Table 2 provides us with a more specific glance at the heterogeneous landscape of local autonomy in the CEE area. It displays the intra-group heterogeneity of every dimension of the LAI based on the standard deviation (SD) values. It shows that the easternmost countries in the CEE area tend to be the most heterogeneous as a group, the mean SD across all seven dimensions amounting to a score of 20,97, clearly above the general mean SD for all considered CEE countries (N=27) of 16,42. According to the values shown in Table 2, the most homogeneous group, conversely, is the Caucasus group. This again must be appreciated as in a cautionary fashion, as the grouping, with our available data, only includes Armenia and Georgia. The most heterogeneous dimension here is access, the mean value of the SDs reaching almost 25.

Table 2: Intra-comparison and cross-country group variations measured by standard deviations.

	Balkans	Baltic	Caucasus	Central Europe	Eastern Europe	Southern Europe	mean
Legal autonomy	20,04	16,97	11,79	23,94	33,49	20,97	21,20
Access	23,73	33,68	23,57	27,36	13,71	23,17	24,20
Policy scope	10,99	3,06	9,62	9,48	16,56	14,05	10,62
Political discretion	9,14	4,75	7,28	5,81	24,00	17,60	11,43
Financial autonomy	15,78	11,00	3,94	12,50	3,16	14,98	10,22
Organisational autonomy	10,51	15,73	33,75	15,63	26,72	12,19	19,09
Non-interference	27,05	19,25	1,97	21,76	29,19	9,62	18,14
mean	16,75	14,92	13,13	16,64	20,97	16,08	16,42
N	11	3	2	4	3	4	27

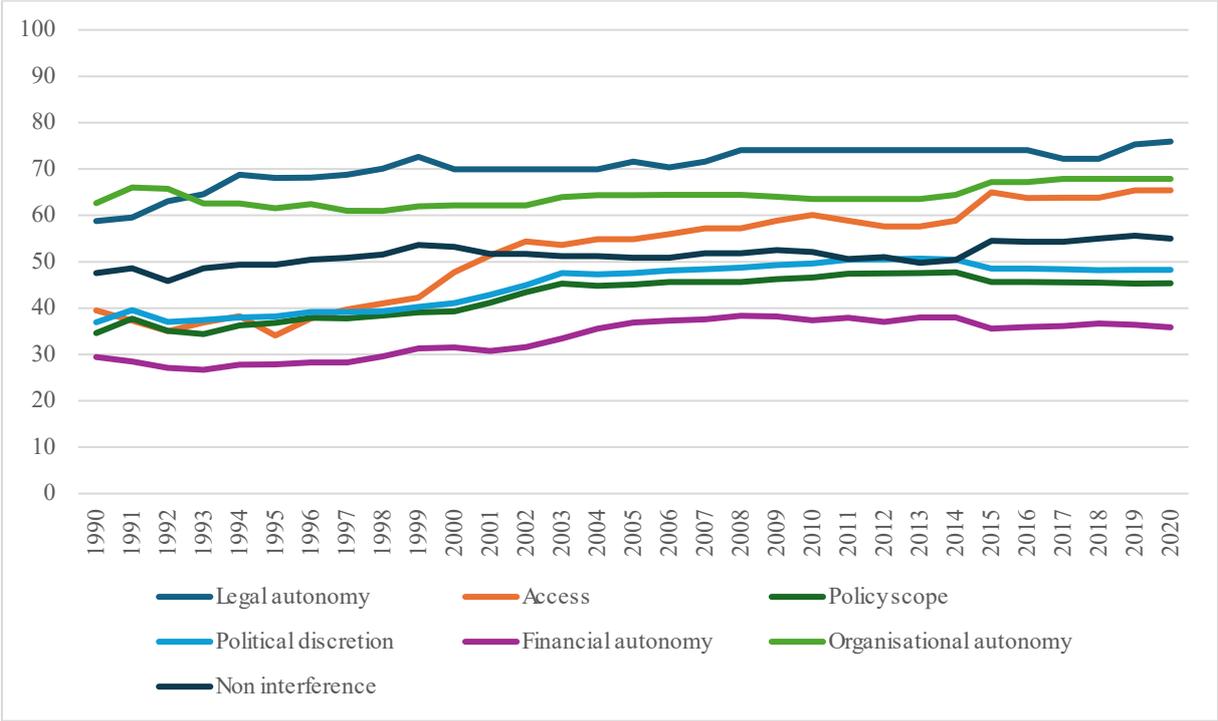
Legend: standard deviations (SDs) of the seven dimensions of the LAI, 2015-2020 mean values, CEE countries, six regional areas and overall means, standardised scores.

4.2 Trends

Having examined the various patterns of local autonomy in the 2015-2020 period in a more cross-sectional manner, we focus in this sub-section on more longitudinal considerations. It is obviously very interesting to observe the various ways in which local autonomy presents itself homogeneously depending on organisational affiliations, geographical groupings, and empirical typologies. However, this welcomes a complementary view on the differentiated development of the LAI, by a more temporal outlook on how local autonomy has evolved, across CEE countries as an aggregated group, but also according to our different categorisation previously used.

Figure 5 shows how, across CEE countries, the seven dimensions of local autonomy have evolved over time. By using standardised scales from 0 to 100 for all dimensions, it offers a certain degree of comparability in the assessment of their progress, also through these visualisations. Overall, legal autonomy is the dimension of local autonomy that has the highest scores over time, except in the first few years of measurement, where organisational autonomy has the highest starting point, but has remained relatively stable, with only a modest increasing curve over time after a short plummeting the first five years. Financial autonomy has consistently remained the lowest scoring dimension across all CEE countries over time, which pinpoints towards tempered fiscal decentralisation in the area. Over time, the access dimension has seen the biggest progress, displaying an increase in 30 years of almost 25% across all CEE countries combined.

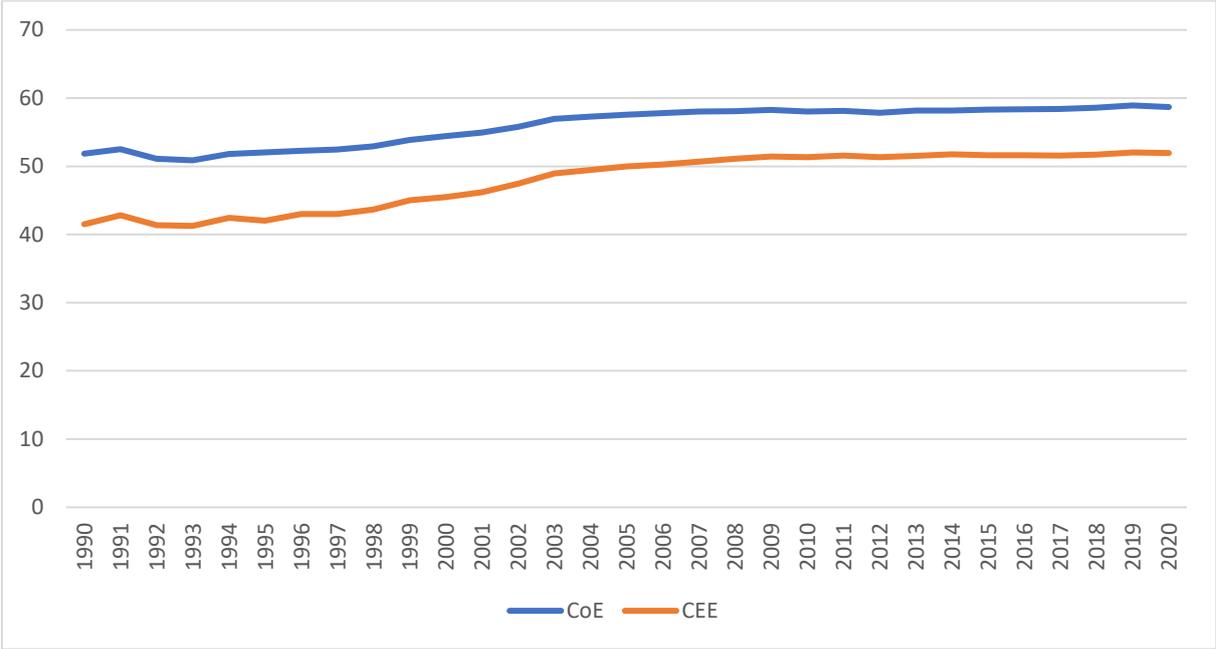
Figure 5: Longitudinal dimensional trends of local autonomy



Legend: Seven dimensions of the LAI over time (1990-2020), CEE countries, standardised scores.

When combining the seven dimensions into the overall index, we end up with a singular curve for all CEE countries, as shown in Figure 6, to which we have added the curve for all CoE member states. Overall, both groups seem to evolve at a similar pace over time, the only major difference being the higher starting point in 1990 for the CoE member states. One explanation could be that both groups share a certain amount of countries, as many CEE countries are equally part of the CoE or join the organisation during this period. The steeper rising curve for the CEE countries can then be attributed to the fact that many of the CEE countries joined the CoE during this period between 1990 and 2020, which implies adhering to the Charter. This would justify a certain coalescing phenomenon of the two lines observed in this figure, that eventually stabilise when the newer CoE member states have joined said organisation by the last decade observed here. The differing lags in increased local autonomy can also be attributed to prolonged periods of ratifying and applying the principles of the Charter through internal legislation (see Table 1 for details on ratification dates). In this sense, the more recent member states, based in the CEE region, appear to still be “catching up” with Western European countries, who have joined the CoE earlier and have also ratified the Charter fewer years after its inception in 1985.

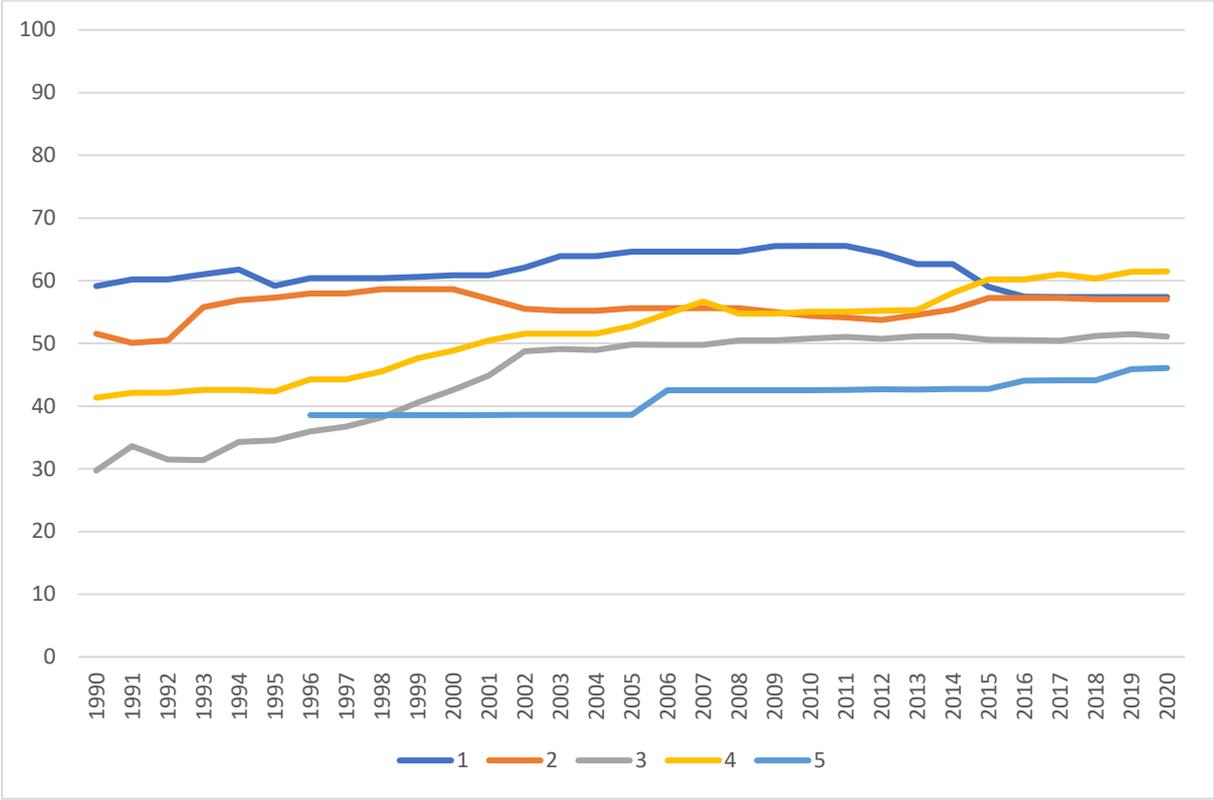
Figure 6: Longitudinal trends of the LAI in CEE countries and CoE member states



Legend: Evolution of the LAI across time (1990-2020), CoE member states (N=44) and CEE countries (N=27), standardised scores.

As was done in the previous section where we focused on recent dynamics in local autonomy, it is relevant to divide the overall CEE countries into two groupings, the first being empirically based and the second geographical, to highlight some more specific evolutions of smaller country groups. Figure 7 indicates how the LAI scores have changed over time for the CEE countries that have been categorised according to Swianiewicz’s (2014) typology. Some interesting dynamics of decentralisation and recentralisation can be highlighted in the various types, starting with Type 1 countries, which were clearly the highest scoring group in the earliest years of assessment, only to tumble towards the second (almost third position). This is notable due to Hungary and Poland being part of this classification, two countries that have recently experienced a decrease in local autonomy after reforms and practices of gradual recentralisation. The biggest increases in groups are to be found in Type 3 and 4 countries, both amount to around 20% more local autonomy over 31 years. Especially the former, which primarily includes Balkan countries, is displaying a steep climb in the first decade, only to stabilise towards the early 2000s. This group contains mostly ex-Yugoslavian territories and is probably related to the emancipation process from its former political entity.

Figure 7: Longitudinal trends of the LAI (by empirical typology)

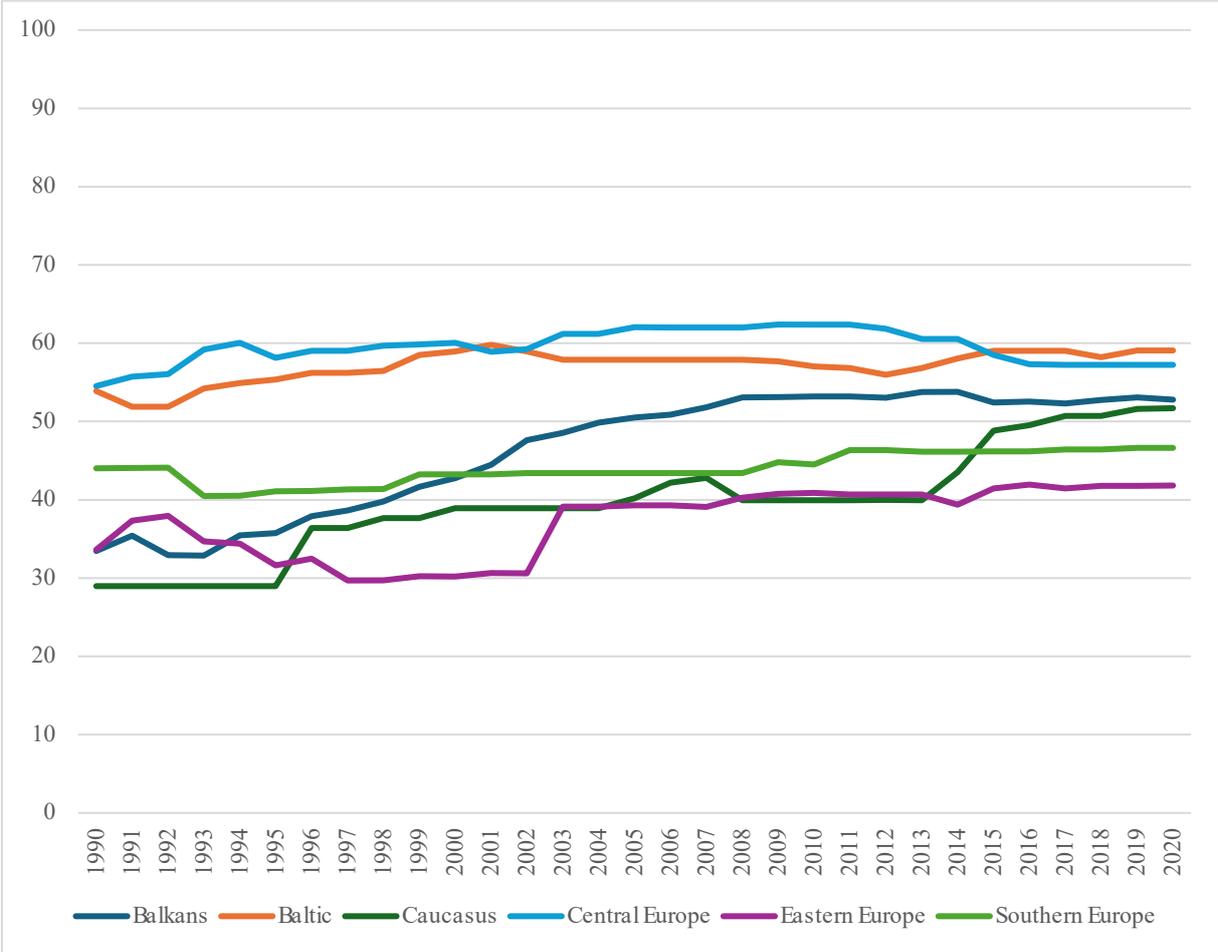


Legend: Evolution of the LAI across time (1990-2020), CEE countries, Swianiewicz (2014) typology (N=19), standardised scores.

This strong progress into the Balkan countries as a group is confirmed when we look at Figure 8. Similarly to Figure 7, we again see the more centrally situated CEE countries start in the highest position in 1990, only to face a progressive decline in the final 5 years studied here. This group again includes the likes of Poland and Hungary, their recentralising tendencies having already been mentioned. Other notable evolutions can be highlighted in the Caucasus area, where periods of almost immobile stability are quickly followed by brusque jumps towards higher levels of autonomy. The “Eastern” European countries (including Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine), also follow a quite unorthodox evolution of autonomy, facing relatively strong centralisation tendencies during the first observed decade, followed by a sudden rocket rise around the 2002-2003 mark, only to remain stable afterwards. Independently of these two categorisations and ways of visualising, many of the sudden important changes (i.e., increased dimension score of more than 20% from one year to another) cannot be attributed to a specific group but more towards country-specific changes. Regarding these sudden changes, most of them are related to either legal autonomy or access. Big changes in these two dimensions account for over a third of the major score changes observed for the CEE countries over the entire 31-year period. More precisely, many of these important developments coincide with adoption of laws on local autonomy, to align the internal legal framework with the principles of the Charter, either before or after ratifying the latter. For example, Moldova and North Macedonia have both adopted a law of local self-government around 2002-03, which then lead to sudden increases across most of the dimensions for both countries. In many other cases where this does not necessarily coincide with the

Charter ratification a few years prior, sudden changes are often related to a Constitutional recognition of local governments, accompanied by more concrete laws on local autonomy. Conversely, most of the important decreases are either prompted by constitutional amendments or national law reforms either by central government (e.g. policy scope and non-interference in Hungary in 2013-15) or constitutional court decisions (e.g. organisational autonomy in Belarus in 1994-97), or rather more the product of substantial practical changes (e.g., access and non-interference in Estonia in 2002-03, access in Poland in 2016). These dynamics reveal interesting insights on a general area (CEE countries) that has faced many considerable changes in the past three decades on many levels, but where efforts towards decentralisation and increased autonomy seem to be the general rule.

Figure 8: Longitudinal trends of the LAI (by regional area).



Legend: Evolution of the LAI across time (1990-2020), CEE countries by regional areas (N=27), standardised scores.

4.3 Potential Implications of Local Autonomy on Government Legitimacy

In this section, after having looked at the various dynamics and trends in local autonomy in the CEE area, we tackle the theoretical consideration as to how local autonomy can matter in the pursuit of good democratic governance. To this end, to provide more general evidence, the subsequent analyses include all CoE member states for which the LAI 2.0 project team was able to collect data (N=44). We analyse the entire group of CoE countries

instead of focusing only on CEE countries in this section, because it increases the amount of observations, but also because a majority of the CoE member states in our sample, are CEE countries (25 of the 27 total CEE countries in our study are part of the CoE). The results most likely apply to the CEE countries as much as to the CoE member states, as they share the common characteristic of belonging to the same overarching organisation and having ratified the Charter (except for the 2 cases of non-CoE members in our sample that are Belarus and Kosovo). We ran regression models using 2015-2020 mean values of the LAI as an independent variable and a selection of input- and output-legitimacy dependent variables, with three control variables, as has been outlined in the methodology section. The overall index is the preferred independent variable over the individual dimensions since it correlates stronger with the dependent variables (tested in an even broader comparative design in Bastianen and Keuffer 2024, forthcoming).

Table 3 presents an overview of the results. The underlying note explains the regression coefficients used and the notation of the p-values. At first glance, it mainly shows that the LAI has a positive and significant influence on most of the examined aspects related to input- and -output legitimacy among CoE member states, according to our design. Regarding input-legitimacy, local autonomy seems to be positively and significantly related to higher quality of democracy and a general perception by citizens of increased ability to participate (Voice and Accountability). It is insufficiently significant when it comes to overall satisfaction with democracy, although the standardised Beta coefficient points towards the right direction. It does not, however, relate to any increase in effective political participation as measured by the Democracy Barometer, in our models. The absence of a significant relationship between local autonomy and local electoral participation has also been highlighted in a recent large-scale comparative study in Europe by Bolgherini et al. (2024). Moving towards output-legitimacy, we see a positive influence of the LAI on most indicators. Increased local autonomy seems to be positively and significantly related to a reduced corruption index, an increase in government effectiveness, and a higher ability of implementing sound policies and regulations promoting development (Regulatory Quality). The influence on happiness or, in other words, general welfare, is not significantly determined in our analysis, but again, the relationship does point in a positive direction. As a preliminary conclusion, we can so far establish a certain influence of increased local autonomy on multiple aspects of input- and output-legitimacy, as we posited in our theoretical considerations.

Having determined the influence of local autonomy on input- and output-legitimacy, we need to address the results related to our set of control variables and to what explanations these observations can be attributed to. First, when controlling for the mean size of local governments, we only highlight one positive and significant relationship, i.e. the ability of governments to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations (Regulatory Quality). Our interpretation would pin this to the aforementioned “large-is-lively” theory, as detailed by Denters et al. (2014). Proponents of this theory emphasize the advantage of scale and scope in governance, which lead to argue that larger local governments are better positioned to address complex issues and fabricate innovative policies as solutions. If an increase in mean size of local governments would, in our models, be positively and significantly related to government effectiveness as well, this would have made a strong case for defenders of said theory.

Second, on EU membership and democratic legitimacy, it appears that its influence is significant across a wide array of indicators presently examined. Primarily, EU membership, is the most important condition to achieve higher quality of democracy, clearly above the other significant variables that are local autonomy and GDP per

capita. Indeed, joining the EU often entails adhering to enhanced democratic standards, including requirements for regular free and fair elections, protection of fundamental rights and respect for the rule of law. Furthermore, EU accession encourages institutional reforms towards enhancing mechanisms for citizen participation, which could possibly explain the variable's influence on Voice and Accountability. Finally, access to EU funding but also its oversight and monitoring is very likely to reduce corruption, increase effectiveness and regulatory quality, as the results tend to suggest.

Third, GDP is a relevant and justifiable control as it accounts for a big part of influence on input- and output-legitimacy across all dependent variables. Although it is certainly correlated with the LAI, its VIF values in all models are well below the tolerance threshold and thus avert the risk of collinearity in our statistical analysis. In sum, higher GDP per capita has significant implications for both input- and output-legitimacy. On the input-related aspects side, the results could suggest that citizens that are more economically empowered, with higher informational and resource availability, tend to be more willing to participate in decision-making processes, perceive their engagement as more impactful, and display higher trust and satisfaction with their local governments. As for the impact on output-related aspects, higher GDP per capita enables the creation of economic opportunities and increased investments, which could possibly lead to more sound policies accompanied by improved service delivery, but also reduced corruption and increased welfare and overall happiness. There are many other interpretations and explanations that would need to be considered. For the sake of our paper, we have limited ourselves to the former as our focus remains on local autonomy and the implications on input- and output-legitimacy.

Without the control variables, the coefficients related to the LAI seem to accentuate even more in favour of local autonomy, but without altering the general direction of the relationships nor the significance. It does however reduce the explanatory value of the models, measured by the adjusted R^2 , which is an additional statistical reason why the control variables are a valid inclusion in the analysis, on top of the theoretical justifications previously mentioned. Based on the results of the control variables, we do not see any evidence that larger municipalities improve the quality of democracy or government effectiveness, which counters the pro-merger arguments. However, EU membership does seem to influence various aspects of legitimacy, notably due to necessary adherence to certain community democratic and governance standards. Finally, economic resources might be the *sine qua non* precondition for the development of better governance outcomes.

All things considered, with or without the chosen control variables, the LAI appears to be significantly related to the outcomes presented above. To directly answer our third research question specifically treated in this section, potential implications of a higher degree of local autonomy, when it comes to democratic governance, can signify a better functioning democracy when it comes to increased overall quality, an increased feeling of involvement by the citizens, less corruption, better tailored policies, and more efficient service delivery.

Table 3: Regressions: Local autonomy, input- and output-legitimacy, with control variables.

	Input aspects of political system				Output aspects of political system			
	Quality of democracy	Voice and Accountability	Satisfaction with democracy	Effective participation	Corruption	Government Effectiveness	Regulatory Quality	Happiness
LAI	0.197*	0.349**	0.153	-0.091	-0.315**	0.337**	0.315**	0.167
Mean size of LG	0.072	0.154	0.049	-0.184	-0.163	0.156	0.249**	0.030
EU member	0.614**	0.448**	0.077	-0.084	-0.419**	0.264**	0.354**	0.122
GDP/capita	0.365**	0.477**	0.739**	0.747**	-0.449**	0.565**	0.513**	0.724**
R ² adj.	0.737	0.742	0.689	0.424	0.733	0.691	0.681	0.701

Note: * sig. = 0.05, ** sig. = 0.01. CoE member states (N=44). Mean values (2015-2020). Standardised Beta coefficients.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This comparative research article covers a wide variety of complementary assessments related to local autonomy in CEE countries. First, it depicts the current patterns of local autonomy (2015-2020 means) according to its seven dimensions across the entire area in comparison to the larger group of CoE member states, then across two groupings (one empirical typology and one more geographical division) to highlight some more specific intricacies. It then tracks more longitudinal trends (1990-2020) in the CEE area globally and then according to our two previously picked categorisations, to determine the evolution of local autonomy more specifically in this burgeoning area and to exemplify some of the ways in which local autonomy has been affected by reforms in these observed countries. This allows us to delve into the theoretical insight that considers local autonomy as the “freedom from” higher levels of government and to see how it not only follows the implementation of cross-national legal frameworks but also more country-specific contexts. Finally, we also explore the “freedom to” approach, in the sense that we assess to what extent local autonomy in CoE member states (which are primarily CEE countries) can possibly influence democratic governance, by establishing potential linkages between heightened level of autonomy and positive outcomes on aspects of input- and output-legitimacy.

To answer our first research question, we have painted colourful pictures of the state of local autonomy in CEE countries, whether using the empirical typology (Swianiewicz 2014) or the geographically driven divide. The components of the typology related to decentralisation characteristics follow the corresponding values of local autonomy dimensions. For example, Type 1 countries are highly functionally and financially decentralised in the typology, which respectively manifests itself in the highest scores for policy scope and financial autonomy. Geographically divided, Baltic and Central European countries globally score highest across all dimensions, but the breakdown of the numbers shows varying patterns. The former demonstrate stronger legal autonomy and access, whereas the latter mostly thrive in organisational aspects followed by legal autonomy. Each area has a dimensional focus on the implementation of local autonomy, but the main differences can only be explained in

country-specific contexts¹⁴, which renders the effort of broader claims quite difficult. At the aggregated level, the most recent period of 2015-2020 does not differentiate the level of local autonomy that much compared to the total number of CoE member states part of the LAI 2.0 data. Local autonomy is primarily lower for financial aspects. Indeed, CEE countries, while in the early stages of independent state-building processes, were allotted with low amounts of financial autonomy by their central governments. This can partially be attributed to slowly increasing capacity by central government, and thus initial high degrees of conditionality in financial resources. Also, the general CoE member states group including many Western European countries who have a longer history of developing financial autonomy serves as a justifiable explanation. Finally, looking at standard deviations for dimensional values across the CEE regions, the easternmost country group of Belarus, Russian Federation and Ukraine displays the strongest heterogeneity, which may highlight a highly volatile area where local autonomy could jump into any direction and/or set an argument for the comparative irrelevancy of this specific geographical grouping.

Second, looking into developments of local autonomy across CEE countries over three decades, we also witness very erratic curves, even though they all generally tend towards heightened autonomy towards 2020. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, all states were very much inclined to increase the autonomy of their local governments, especially during the 1990s. These reforms were usually kicked off by the creation of new state Constitutions or constitutional amendments that then allowed for the elaboration of laws guaranteeing local autonomy. These developments often coincided with the adoption of the Charter, thus triggering alignment mechanisms. In more recent years, however, we observe some recentralisation tendencies in some of the early champions of decentralisation (e.g. Hungary and Poland, according to Swianiewicz's (2014) typology) but also in the Russian Federation and neighbouring states such as Belarus. These tendencies are oftentimes related to specific dimensions but are sometimes reflected in the overall LAI as well. However, the main trend directs towards increased autonomy across all dimensions in the CEE area, even though the evolution has stabilised in recent years and all regional areas have coalesced into a medium-high level of autonomy (in comparison with all 57 countries studied by the LAI 2.0, see Ladner et al. 2023).

These reforms towards increased autonomy as encouraged by the CoE and enforced by the Charter as its instrument seem opportune and justifiable, in the sense that a higher level of local autonomy seems to be related positive outcomes of various aspects of input- and output-legitimacy, potentially implying better democratic governance. On a theoretical level, this emphasizes the complementarity of the "freedom from" and "freedom to" perspectives. Local autonomy isn't an end in itself, but also a key tool of good democratic governance, providing the "freedom to" input- and output-legitimate outcomes. For practitioners, in the CEE but also the broader CoE area, these linkages could be seen as beneficial, especially since the adoption of a CoE recommendation¹⁵ to secure and strengthen democracy and good governance across all levels in Europe. The 12 key principles include setting fundamentals on elements such as protecting and promoting the quality of democracy as well as the practice of

¹⁴ This warrants a future path of research related to our third mentioned theoretical insight of local autonomy as a reflection of local identity, i.e. a more sociological approach that considers local autonomy as a capacity to express identity in power relations. This requires a more qualitative/bottom-up approach (see Keuffer and Horber-Papazian 2020).

¹⁵ Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2023)5, adopted by the Committee of Ministers on September 6th, 2023. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/-/good-democratic-governance-a-new-standard-for-the-council-of-europe-member-states> (Accessed 09.05.2024).

good administration and the delivery of high-quality public services, all of which we have determined to be positively related to increased local autonomy. With the recent adoption of this new recommendation by the CoE, this could also influence the landscape of local autonomy and governance in CEE countries in the years to come.

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