More “Europe” in Municipal Policy Structures?
Anchoring European Youth Policy at the Municipal Level in Germany

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

Marit Pelzer
Centre for European Youth Policy at the German Youth Institute, Munich, Germany
mpelzer@dji.de

Abstract

Against the background of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy (2010–2018) in Germany, the article explores the question of how European youth policy can be anchored at the municipal level. The article discusses (1) federal and regional efforts to incorporate the municipal level in implementing European youth policy, (2) arising challenges and (3) the significance of European policy for national, regional and municipal youth policy. Results suggest that although the involved actors stipulate the importance of municipal level involvement in designing the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, the Strategy is actually implemented as a top-down strategy in which the municipal level receives impulses from other levels, rather than being incorporated in policy development. The article concludes that, in order to successfully strengthening European impulses in sub-national youth welfare discourses, mutual understanding and dialogue between levels is just as necessary as a content-related rather than process-related discussion.
Keywords

anchoring – youth policy – EU youth strategy – multilevel governance – municipal government

Introduction

The development of a European Union (EU) youth policy has gathered pace rapidly over the last twenty years. Since 2001, when the White Paper “A new impetus for European youth” was published (European Commission, 2001), further frameworks for cooperation between the EU member states in the youth field have appeared via the Open Method of Co-ordination, the most prominent of which are the so-called EU Youth Strategy 2010–2018 (Council of the European Union, 2009) and the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027 (Council of the European Union, 2018). Both strategies offer a framework for EU member states to take, within their own responsibility and according to the Open Method of Co-ordination, appropriate measures of implementation in order to move closer to the objectives set out in the EU Youth Strategy. The development of such a EU Youth Strategy has implications for youth policy in EU member states: they have to adjust the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy to both European objectives as well as national priorities. Similarly, research points out that the development of youth policy depends on the interactions between politics, policy, the societal perception of young people as well as welfare state notions (cf. Chevalier, 2019; Loncle & Muniglia, 2011; Wallace & Bendit, 2009). At the same time, policy development also depends on how the responsibility for the implementation of policy decisions is regulated within a member state (Börzel & Panke, 2016; Radaelli, 2009).

The question of how European policy is implemented in the member states has in recent years been considered from a political science perspective in the course of Europeanisation (Exadaktylos & Radaelli, 2015) and (mostly legal) implementation studies (Löfgren, 2015). Within the discourse of Europeanisation, a particular focus is on the relationship between the EU and its member states, and on the question of how different levels implement European requirements (e.g. Gollata & Newig, 2017; Borghetto & Franchino, 2010; Marshall, 2005; Rooij, 2002). Most of this research focusses on so-called ‘hard’ law, in which the EU issues directives and regulations to be implemented by member states (e.g. Thomann & Sager, 2017).

The EU Youth Strategy however, is a case of ‘soft’ policy (Loncle & Muniglia, 2011), in which action programmes, conclusions and recommendations govern
the policy field. Governed by the Open Method of Co-ordination as a new mode of governance (Héritier & Rhodes, 2010), it is an area of research which only recently came to the attention of governance scholars. Since the early beginnings, European youth policy research focussed on analyses of its historical development (e.g. Devlin 2010; Siurala 2007; Williamson 2007), its modes of governance in general (e.g. Banjac 2014; Bessant & Watts 2014; Dibou 2012) and its governance through the Open Method of Co-ordination in particular (e.g. Copeland & Ter Haar 2015). There has been hardly any research on national, regional and municipal implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. Exceptions are the evaluation of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in the EU member states which was commissioned by the European Commission (European Commission, 2016) and the – country-specific – evaluation of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany (Hofmann-van de Poll et al., 2019; Riedle & Hofmann-van de Poll, 2018; Baumbast et al., 2015).

The example of Germany provides an interesting case of implementation, as it has an elaborated youth welfare system, based on a federal structure with the municipal level being responsible for the implementation of youth policy. The national level, which is addressed in the EU Youth Strategy as the main level of action, can often only take on a role as a mediator of European impulses to sub-national levels, a role as a stimulator, or a role as a financier of model projects.

This article takes a closer look at this constellation. Designed as an empirical single-case study, we use the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany as an example to explore the question of how a municipal anchoring of European youth policy functions in a federal state in which the national level is only partly responsible for the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, but at the same time is regarded as the contact point at European level.

It thus takes the perspective of a policy field in which, from a European point of view, there are hardly any possibilities of assertion vis-à-vis national, regional and municipal levels. At the same time, the connection between the European and the sub-national levels is recognised in the EU Youth Strategy, where it is written ‘in order to ensure sustainable impact on young people, it is important that EU youth policy be implemented with the interlinkages with regional and local levels in mind and that activities are conducted to support youth policies at grass-roots level.’ (Council of the European Union, 2018). However, this Council Resolution does not contain any concrete details on how these interlinkages could look like.

The question thus arises, what Europeanisation of such a non-binding policy field means when it comes to the municipal level, and under what conditions it can take place. With the present case study we analyse the discussion
on Europeanisation – defined by German policy makers in this particular case as anchoring European youth policy at the municipal level – of German municipal youth policy, the challenges to be tackled at different levels and how cross-level implementation of European youth policy might be shaped in the future.

The article is structured as follows. After presenting an overview of youth policy and the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, the third section describes the research methodology. The fourth section analyses how the actors involved in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany define municipal anchoring of European youth policy, and the challenges arising for the different levels of actors. In the fifth section, we present a modified model of municipal anchoring of EU youth policy, thus complementing the strategies used and proposed by federal and Länder actors. The last section concludes and gives prospects for the further development of municipal anchoring of EU youth policy.

**Youth Policy in Germany**

Responsibilities for child and youth welfare in Germany are regulated by law (Child and Youth Services Act (KJHG/SGB VIII), Basic Law) and clearly divided between the different levels of the federal state (Meuth et al., 2014). The municipalities enjoy a high degree of autonomy: they are responsible for the implementation and practical elaboration of local youth work and youth social work. The Federal Government and the Länder perform, in addition to the task of establishing the legal and administrative regulations, a stimulating function: their task is to set the framework for (the implementation of European) youth policy in Germany by means of model projects and financial support, thereby encouraging practical elaboration of youth policy at the municipal level. Looking at the European level, the distribution of responsibilities in the area of youth policy between the EU and the member states is similar to that which applies within Germany: the EU coordinates, supplements and supports measures taken by the member states, while member states themselves are responsible for the concrete elaboration of the policy (European Union 2016, Art. 6).

It follows from this distribution of responsibilities that cooperation between the levels is crucial if youth policy is to be implemented successfully at all levels of child and youth welfare. In recent years, the various levels of the child and youth welfare system in Germany – federal, Länder and municipal – have had to contend with wide-ranging challenges. The expansion of children’s day
care, the influx of refugees into Europe and Germany and the emergence of anti-democratic tendencies are just some of the issues here (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth 2017, pp. 406–426). At the same time, youth work practice has been confronted with a growing shortage of skilled specialists for some time, while years of cuts have likewise taken their toll (Ibid., pp. 372–80). For the municipal level, this means on the one hand that its tasks have been expanded, but on the other hand, financial resources to carry out these tasks are limited. Financial aid packages and political programs can only close this gap to a limited extent.

The development of a distinctive EU youth policy (Banjac, 2014; Dibou, 2012) has resulted in the fact that both challenges and potential solutions in the national context have taken on an additional dimension – namely a European one. To a certain extent EU youth policy can address new insights and impulses to tackle national challenges. As the German Länder formulated in 2010, an EU Youth Strategy may not only contribute to the further development of youth policy in Germany, but also has the potential to contribute to improving the living conditions of young people (Jugend- und Familienministerkonferenz, 2010). As a result, the framing and elaboration of youth policy in Germany ultimately takes place at four different levels of varying significance: the European, federal, Länder, and municipal levels.

**EU Youth Strategy in Germany**

The formal conditions regarding cooperation and responsibilities of the Federal Government and the Länder concerning the EU are regulated in the Act on Cooperation between the Federal Government and the Länder in European Union Matters. Accordingly, the Federal Government is obliged not only to inform the Länder of EU procedures but also to involve them in determining the negotiating position in so far as Länder interests are affected (cf. German Bundestag 1993, Art. 3). With regard to the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy 2010–2018, both the federal government and the German Länder have actively called for a coordinated approach between the federal and Länder governments to ensure that implementation in Germany is effective and sustainable (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2010; Jugend- und Familienministerkonferenz, 2010).

As a result, coordination of the EU Youth Strategy implementation in Germany from 2010 to 2018 was directed by the federal and Länder ministries responsible for youth policy within the framework of a Federal-Länder working group (Bund-Länder-Arbeitsgruppe, short B-L-AG). In addition, a National Dialogue was initiated to involve municipal authorities, voluntary child and
youth service organisations, youth welfare services, youth associations and research institutions in the implementation process – both structurally (through a Federal Advisory Board on EU Youth Strategy implementation) and selectively (e.g. through events) (Baumbast et al., 2015). Implementation of EU Youth Strategy saw thus one of the first attempts to shape youth policy across all levels – from the European through to the municipal level.

Besides these structural and selective forms of involvement of municipal authorities, the central German actors formulated the slogan ‘More Europe in child and youth welfare’ as their guiding principle of implementation. It immanently focused on anchoring European youth policy at the municipal level.

**Research Methodology**

The research on anchoring EU youth policy in German municipal policy was embedded in the evaluation of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany. Designed as a formative process evaluation (Rossi et al., 2004, pp. 34–35; 56–58), the evaluation was divided in three phases: the evaluation analysed modes of co-operation between involved implementation actors (2010–2014), implementation strategies with regard to participation (2014–2016) and the overall governance process (2017–2019). Research on municipal anchoring of the EU Youth Strategy covered all phases. Data on which this research relies on are documents, interviews and focus groups. Central research questions were the understanding of municipal anchoring as a concept and guiding principle by the involved actors, the challenges that have to be overcome in implementing such a principle, and the question of how such a concept can be pursued in a way being successful for all actors involved.

Documents related to the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany were collected and analysed. They consisted of minutes of the meetings of the B-L-AG, the Advisory Board and other meetings between actors relevant to the EU Youth Strategy as well as relevant documents, invitations and (informal) papers of actors and organisations involved in implementing the EU Youth Strategy in Germany.

A total of 159 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in three rounds (2012–13, 2015 and 2017) with members of the B-L-AG and the Advisory Board as well as persons involved in selected Länder projects on the governance of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. Due to the repeated interview rounds with the same people, it was possible to follow policy and attitude changes over time. Interview questions were related to the actors’
perceivance of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, the roles of the involved actors as well as the established structures. The findings of the evaluation were validated and discussed in two focus groups, in 2017 on the implementation process and structures, and in 2018 on the implementation contents and content-related results.

The interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed and anonymised. The analysis of all transcripts and documents was done through qualitative content analysis according to Mayring (Mayring, 2017). MaxQDA® was used to process the data.

The Concept of Municipal Anchoring: from Cooperation to Multiplication

Due to the varying responsibilities as outlined above, all levels with their specific interests have to be included in EU Youth Strategy implementation if youth policy is to take effect across all levels. The legally prescribed responsibilities provide such a framework to a certain extent, but this is just one factor that determines what form collaboration takes in practice. There is certainly room for manoeuvre within this predetermined framework. In implementing the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, the aim of the Federal Government and the Länder has been to reach out to decision-makers and professionals at the municipal level, thereby involving the latter in shaping the implementation process – the motto here being ‘anchoring policy at the municipal level’. After all, the Federal Government and the Länder state that it was a matter of ‘specifying their [Federal Government’s and the Länder’s] concerns in even more concrete terms for local practice on site and reliably involving the municipal and local levels in further implementation’ (Federal-Länder Working Group, 2014). A solid anchoring of European, federal and Länder youth policy at the municipal level was also called for by civil society actors (Child and Youth Welfare Association – AGJ, 2013; 2016).

During the initial years of EU Youth Strategy implementation in Germany, it was a publicly declared goal to shape implementation in a way that was geared towards the participation of all actors (called ‘principle of cooperation’ by the authors). This principle appears in various documents issued in the course of the implementation process. In the Federal and Länder work programme for EU Youth Strategy implementation, for example, it is written that the Federal Government and Länder share their experience of ‘involvement of the municipal level’ (Federal-Länder Working Group, 2011).
Over the years, this perspective changed. Rather than directly involving the municipal level in the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy, the federal government and the Länder turned towards the idea of ‘anchoring’ the EU Youth Strategy at the municipal level. In its 2014 Resolution, the Working Group of the Supreme Youth and Family Authorities of the Länder states emphatically ‘strengthening the regional and municipal anchoring of EU Youth Strategy […] is of particular importance to the Federal-Länder Working Group in the second phase of implementation’ (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Obersten Landesjugend- und Familienbehörden 2014).

Similarly, the systematic analysis of the interview and group discussion data indicates a pattern of thinking among the various actors involved in implementation in which the idea of ‘anchoring’ is mentioned. The interviewees – members of the Federal Government-Länder Working Group and the Federal Advisory Board – as well as those who took part in the group discussions believe it is up to the Federal Government and the Länder to ensure EU Youth Strategy stimuli reaching through to the municipal level. The focus is less on involving the municipal level in implementing EU Youth Strategy in the sense of collaboration than on transporting the stimuli to the municipal level. As such, the municipal level is regarded by interviewees as being the recipient of stimuli provided by EU Youth Strategy. At the same time, interviewees say they expect such stimuli to encourage the implementation of home-grown initiatives at municipal level. The responsibility for anchoring policy lies with the Federal Government and the Länder, whose task it is to carry forward the ideas and stimuli offered by the EU. This idea of anchoring policy at the municipal level as a process in which the mere passing on of stimuli itself leads to activities on the part of actors at the various levels is referred to in the following as the ‘multiplier principle’.

The approach of implementing European youth policy as a process in which Federal Government and Länder bear responsibility for municipal participation or anchoring poses a range of challenges for both the Federal Government and the Länder – as well as for the municipal level. In the following, the challenges identified by the evaluation are first analysed for the Federal Government and the Länder and subsequently for the municipal level.

**Challenges at Federal and Länder Level**

The results of the evaluation show municipal anchoring of policy containing two main challenges at federal and Länder level. The first challenge is to define what is meant by anchoring policy at the municipal level. The
second challenge concerns the youth policy responsibilities of the Federal Government, the Länder and the municipal level and the resulting tension between Europeanisation strategies pursued by Federal Government and Länder on the one hand and by municipal self-government on the other. In the following, evaluation results are presented in the form of statements by the respondents.

**Definitions of ‘Municipal Anchoring’**

Municipal anchoring, i.e. the anchoring of European youth policy at the municipal level, is a term used by many actors and usually associated with vague, barely defined ideas. Attempts by the actors to define or explain what municipal anchoring means, as identified in the material, show that in most cases it is essentially understood in the definition of the ‘multiplier principle’. Municipal anchoring is thus defined as the passing on of information to the municipal level (I 1, line 23; I 44, line 141) or the incorporation of the municipal level in federal and regional implementation processes (I 1762, line 103). The implicit attribution of meaning emerging from the interviews and group discussions also indicates that the anchoring of policy at the municipal level – though not specifically defined in this way – is perceived as involving a top-down process, although at the same time it is stipulated that it is not designed as such:

‘(...) [the implementation process] is not top-down – there is no intervention or that kind of thing, but at the same time the only thing we ever talk about is how we can get things to drip downwards from the top level – i.e. issues, stimuli and so on. We hardly ever talk about whether there is anything at the local, municipal level that is passed back – or indeed at the Länder level. So is there any kind of feedback process? (...) Is there some way of making the transfer happen the other way round, if you like? The discussion always revolves around the fact that everything has to come from the top and be sprinkled downwards.’ (GD 1655, LINE 205).

At the same time it emerges that a supplementary procedure – a feedback process – is certainly conceived of and indeed desired by those interviewed. What does not emerge from the interviews is what the purpose of municipal anchoring is or what conditions would have to be fulfilled for the anchoring of policy at municipal level to be described as successful. To this regard, the systematic

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1 I = interview, GD = group discussion, numbers are for the purpose of anonymisation. Line refers to the relevant section of the respective interview or group discussion. The original transcripts are in German. The quoted passages were translated for this article.
Data analysis of the interviews revealed a large number of implicit contradictions, particularly with regard to the question of when municipal anchoring is or has the potential to be successful.

On the one hand, municipal anchoring is understood to be successful if it is realised as a nationwide anchoring of policy. On the other hand, it is regarded as a success if there is a perceptible increase in the number of actors dealing with European issues at the municipal level. Analysis of the evaluation results indicates that respondents regard success as meaning the incorporation and discussion of fundamental questions and issues with a European perspective, as well as the organisation of dedicated events and activities on the theme of ‘Europe’.

This heterogeneity of interpretations as to how successful municipal anchoring is to be identified can also be seen in how differently actors assess the involvement of the municipal level in EU Youth Strategy implementation in Germany. To some extent, the data can be seen to bear out the view that participation of municipal umbrella associations in the Federal Advisory Board has proven to be a suitable way of involving the municipal level. There are however also indications that, despite the important communication and clustering function of municipal umbrella organisations, the idea of achieving cooperation with the municipal level through such representation is seen as rather inadequate:

As far as political representation is concerned, involving all these municipal umbrella organisations makes relatively little sense. Experience has shown that it’s always more effective to get ten or twenty municipalities on your side and make practical progress with them. (I 30, LINE 69)

The perspectives gained from the data not only indicate the heterogeneous and individual nature of actors’ underlying understanding of municipal anchoring, they also shed light on the structural conditions giving rise to this diversity. As can be seen, the various levels involved in the implementation process not only have differing formal responsibilities, they also have their own specific dynamics and interpretations. There has been too little negotiation between these perspectives in the past – which is why it has not been possible to establish a shared understanding of what municipal anchoring is and what the consequences are in terms of implementation. Whether municipal anchoring can be described as successful in recent years thus depends fundamentally on how its goals are defined – which, logically speaking, will determine the degree of success.
Youth Policy Responsibilities

As already explained at the outset, the second challenge identified relates to how to go about dealing with the varying competences for youth policy in Germany. It refers to the tension between formal responsibilities for the issue of Europe on the one hand – along with the resulting implementation strategies at federal and Länder level – and municipal self-government on the other.

The federal level in particular has only limited room for manoeuvre beyond providing stimuli, for example in the form of documents or model projects. The interviews and group discussions articulate the tensions and difficulties here:

And so of course, advice as to what the municipal level should be doing [...] is often well-intentioned, but at the end of the day we [the federal level] cannot commit ourselves in the sense of making promises in terms of what a municipality ultimately has to do, for the simple reason that it has the right of municipal self-government (144, line 20).

The analysis shows that over and above a simple mere interest at federal level in a Europeanisation of youth policy at municipal level, there is also an effort to concretely advance and implement the anchoring of policy at municipal level. The specific situation in which the municipal level finds itself as seen from the point of view of the federal level was also addressed. The thematic focus of EU Youth Strategy implementation in Germany on three fields of action (participation, non-formal learning and transition stages) can also be viewed in this light as an attempt by the federal and Länder levels to limit themselves to issues which they regard not only as relevant but also as manageable to the municipal level. In their efforts to achieve a municipal anchoring of EU Youth Strategy in Germany, the federal and Länder levels see themselves as being dependent on the municipal level due to the latter’s right to local self-government.

One strategy to reduce tensions between actors – such as a sense that one side’s efforts and needs are not properly perceived by the other – can be by means of a joint negotiation process. The efforts at the federal level to address the situation at municipal level by narrowing down the range of themes would find greater approval if the themes are defined jointly – in cooperation with the municipal level. At the same time, the municipal level would be able to identify more closely with these themes if it is involved in defining what these are. In the course of EU Youth Strategy implementation in Germany, this approach was indeed applied to the extent that the practical elaboration of the
themes was discussed in the Federal Advisory Board and under participation of municipal umbrella organisations.

This tension between the perception of the municipal situation based on representation on the one hand and a direct negotiation process on the other likewise becomes evident in view of the recommendations issued by the Federal Advisory Board to achieve greater anchoring of EU Youth Strategy at the municipal level. In an attempt to clarify the discussion on municipal anchoring, the Board issued a Recommendation Paper on this issue. In the Paper, the Federal Advisory Board emphasises the importance of Europe, i.e. the EU, for (municipal) youth policy. In terms of its recommendations for strategies of anchoring European youth policy at the municipal level, however, it remains largely rooted in the context of cross-border mobility and labour market policy (Federal Advisory Board, 2015). The idea of opening up this perspective in terms of both structure and content is only considered from a theoretical point of view; this is because a coherent strategy and the personnel resources needed to implement the strategy are, according to the Recommendation Paper, frequently not sufficiently available at municipal level (Ibid.).

In summary, it can be stated that – based on the data evaluated – the federal and Länder levels have an interest in anchoring European youth policy at the municipal level. However, they feel unable to implement this interest in practice due to the principle of municipal self-government. The authority to implement European youth policy locally in practice lies more or less exclusively with the municipal authorities.

The analysis also indicates an implicit attribution of responsibility to the Federal Government, as expressed by the voluntary child and youth service organisations involved. In the interviews and group discussions conducted as part of the evaluation, the responsibility for the failure of implementation on the municipal level is repeatedly linked to the role of the Federal Government:

Well, if Federal Government has an interest in us implementing something, then it should enable us to do so as voluntary child and youth service organisations (GD 1010, LINE 16).

It was not until Federal Government pulled out that the whole thing was over – it all stopped and, yes: everyone went back to doing what they’d been doing before (I 1004, LINE 63).

Despite this informal attribution, Länder too are in charge of the process of anchoring policy at the municipal level and indeed specify this as part of their mission (Federal-Länder Working Group, 2011).
This discrepancy between formal responsibility and informal attribution of responsibility is one of the great challenges that confronted the implementation process of municipal anchoring in the past.

Challenges at the Municipal Level

Up to this point we have looked at challenges facing the federal and Länder levels in their attempt to anchor European policy stimuli at the municipal level. We will now focus on the challenges that the municipal level has had to contend within the course of this anchoring process. The evaluation identified two fundamental challenges at the municipal level. On the one hand there are structural conditions and on the other hand the political framework within which the anchoring process takes place.

Reduced Structures, Shortage of Skilled Professionals and Professional Training

Federal, regional and municipal actors agree that a stable youth work structure on the ground is required in order to be able to be receptive to European stimuli (I 539, line 75; GD 1471, line 433). The data indicate that such stable structures are seen as a prerequisite for reaching young people; after all, they ultimately are the target group of youth policy activities. In Germany, such structures are provided by municipal child and youth welfare services. However, for some time now the latter have had to cope with a growing shortage of skilled professionals as well as the consequences of a shift in financial resources – over many years – in favour of youth social work and school-related afternoon activities (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth 2017, p. 381). This development has resulted in a destabilisation of the existing structures:

There is basically a danger – both from the conceptual and from the financial point of view – uh, that initiatives put out by the EU will come up against municipal youth work structures that have essentially been pared down – though to a regionally varied extent of course. My own feeling is that it will be very difficult to manage this balancing act [between European demands and municipal realities] – and that’s the consequence of a precarious situation in the area of youth work – municipal youth work – on the one hand, and control being exercised at the EU level on the other (I 41, LINE 33).
The thinning out of existing youth work structures is particularly evident in the prevailing shortage of skilled professionals:

And if there's nobody at municipal level who has time for it, i.e. if there's a lack of staff, and there's no money, or indeed both, you have to start finding out about the topic – or even being able to read this type of recommendation when you don't have the background, then things can easily peter out very rapidly (GD 1471, LINE 223).

There's nobody able to put these things into practice on a local basis, simply because there's a lack of skilled professionals (GD 1846, LINE 279).

So the difficulty in dealing with suggestions and stimuli provided by the EU at the municipal level in recent years has been primarily a question of ‘coping’ as a result of insufficiently resourced structures – and not mainly due to a fundamental hostility towards the ideas themselves or indeed towards the EU as a stimulus-provider.

In addition, the analysis indicated that linking ‘Europe’ and European youth policy to work at the municipal level seemed to be a difficult undertaking even for skilled professionals. It was repeatedly made clear in the interviews that the municipal anchoring of youth policy was also difficult because municipal experts often didn’t know what to make of the topic of ‘Europe’; it was said to be ‘too far removed’ from their own work (I 11, line 155; I 29, line 28–34; I 854, line 119). Here, too, there is no fundamental hostility towards the question of Europe or the thematic priorities of the EU Youth Strategy, but rather a need for visible links with day-to-day work. As such, it would seem worthwhile to focus more on the connections between ‘Europe’ and the issues involved in youth and social work in training courses and professional development. However, it should also be borne in mind that ‘Europe’ concerns more than just international mobility, networking and sharing experience: as a practical consequence of the Europeanisation of living environments, ‘Europe’ has long become established in German child and youth welfare (Riedle & Hofmann-van de Poll, 2018).

Relevance of the Topic

In addition to the challenges already described – which are firmly rooted in the German child and youth welfare system – a systematic analysis of the data revealed that general political developments have also had noticeable impact on the efforts made by municipalities to anchor EU Youth Strategy in Germany. In terms of implementation in Germany, the idea of attaching priority to the topic of ‘Europe’ was particularly noticeable in connection with other
politically relevant issues. According to respondents, the consequences of this prioritisation became particularly obvious in 2015 when the refugee issue suddenly came to the fore (GD 1655, line 160; GD 1846, line 212). In addressing the refugee flux, there was no capacity available to deal with ‘add-on’ issues such as ‘Europe’.

The dilemma faced by professionals at the municipal level in terms of the prioritisation of the EU Youth Strategy in child and youth welfare is well illustrated by the debate that arose in connection with the refugee issue. Time and personnel are frequently tied up in issues that policy-makers deem to be more urgent. As a result, actors in the municipal authorities and in the area of child and youth welfare gain the impression that their work is primarily geared towards responding to urgent issues, giving them little opportunity to shape policy on a longer-term basis. Interviewees talk of responding to ‘emergency situations’ rather than being able to develop policy strategy (I 455, line 31).

What is more, it is evident that ‘Europe’ or the so-called ‘European dimension’ of German child and youth welfare work is primarily equated with mobility, networking and peer-learning (JUGEND für Europa, n.d.; Riedle & Hofmann-van de Poll, 2018). In view of the fact that refugee migration to Europe requires a European response, and that the integration of young refugees is an issue being relevant both in Europe and Germany, equating ‘Europe’ with ‘EU Youth Strategy’ in the area of youth policy is clearly inadequate. ‘Europe’ covers more than just EU Youth Strategy, thus being just as relevant when addressing the youth policy challenges that the various European states have to overcome to varying degrees. In the context of the refugee issue, one might observe that the debate very much included the EU and the question of solidarity as well as the benefits of the EU and of European identity: strictly speaking therefore, the refugee issue would not have been an ‘add-on issue’ to be addressed in the context of the Europeanisation of child and youth welfare.

Through systematic analysis of the available data material, the evaluation has identified and traced various paths of development in the municipal anchoring of European youth policy in Germany, and there are clear signs that a joint effort is being made by actors at the various levels. At the same time, however, there are a number of structural as well as content-related circumstances affecting the success of the municipal anchoring of European youth policy in Germany and whether or not this is perceived as successful. In order to further strengthen the municipal anchoring of European youth policy in the future, a common approach is needed. The next chapter will therefore examine the question of how the municipal perspective can be taken into account when anchoring the EU Youth Strategy in Germany.
A Modified Model of Municipal Anchoring – Taking the Municipal Perspective into Account from the Outset

The case of the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy in Germany provides an interesting case because it, at the one side, acknowledges existing concepts of multi-level governance and federal policy implementation by stressing the necessity of taking federal, Länder and municipal perspectives into account. As one interviewed person from the Länder level pointed out:

"The challenge is essentially to manage this balancing act from the local level through to the national level. I think this is a huge challenge because if we take an issue on board, we still don't really know what the nature of the issue really is and what significance it has at the local level. And this is a challenge I find myself confronted with time and time again – I have a topic, but how can I get hold of information and assessments relating to this topic from the local level so as prepare for a meeting, for example?" (I 10, LINE 25)

At the other side, despite the willingness of the involved actors, this statement also shows a certain helplessness when it comes to involving the municipal level in designing and implementing EU youth policy in Germany. What follows is a certain degree of implementation failure leading to frustration and ultimately resignation (Hofmann-van de Poll & Pelzer, 2018). These developments present a challenge as to how implementation can be designed in such a way that failure can be (partly) prevented. Following the previously outlined results of the analysis of the present case of municipal anchoring, a modified model of municipal anchoring would have to include close cooperation between the different levels.

The importance of collaboration is also stipulated in research. Scholars of policy implementation have pointed out dispersed governance and inadequate collaborative policy making as just two of multiple causes of policy failure (Hudson et al. 2019, pp. 3–4). Similarly, improvement of policy implementation comes with ‘connecting actors vertically and horizontally in a process of collaboration and joint deliberation’ (Ansell et al. 2017, pp. 475). The significance of collaboration between both governmental and non-governmental actors of various levels, for the sake of governing a certain policy field, is also stressed in the multi-level governance approach (Piattoni 2010, pp. 83). Indeed, the early development of the implementation of EU Youth Strategy in Germany was based on the idea of multi-level governance in which the Federal-Länder Working Group and the Advisory Board were arenas in which the involved..."
actors coordinated their actions (Baumbast et al., 2015, pp. 215ff). However, our analysis showed that over the course of time, the ‘cooperation principle’ was substituted by a ‘multiplier principle’, subsequently leading to disconnected implementation by the involved actors. In order for the ‘cooperation principle’ to once again become the central pillar of governance, our model of municipal anchoring is based on three interconnected assumptions: municipal involvement in policymaking; municipal agenda-setting and mutual recognition of perspectives.

A first and important step is to involve the municipal level in the design and implementation of national policy that is based on the process and results of the EU Open Method of Co-ordination. For this to work, our analysis shows that there needs to be a better connection between the levels. This connection cannot only rest on intermediary organisations and structures, such as municipal umbrella organisations. In this matter, policy implementation researchers focusing on domestic implementation rather than European implementation draw attention to the necessary link between policy designers with front-line staff and target groups (Ansell 2017, pp. 468). This differentiation is an important consideration in the German case, as cooperation took place between policy makers and municipal umbrella organisations rather than people working directly with young people at the municipal level.

This brings us to our second assumption. A key element for a successful municipal anchoring is the ability of agenda-setting by municipal actors. Rather than deciding the European agenda, we understand agenda-setting as the ability of municipal actors to discuss their needs with regional, national and European levels, thus contributing to the design and ultimately implementation of policy. Up to now, the attempt to achieve municipal anchoring has focused on a previously defined European stimulus – whether an idea, paper or discussion – being handed down to subsequent levels. Through such top-down Europeanisation, the policies of the EU member states can be aligned (see Börzel & Panke 2016, pp. 111). In the case of policies governed by soft law, this strategy can be effective if a topic is already being addressed at municipal level and/or European policy is viewed as an enrichment to domestic policy. If this is not the case or if it is not perceived as such, the sense arises of the implementation of European youth policy generating ‘additional work on top’ (I 768, line 274). As a result, the effect at the municipal level tends to be one of rejection – the very opposite of the strengthening that is intended:

And then we get to the municipal level – and they go up in arms and say to me ‘Oh no, not all this fuss again. I have enough problems here as it is, please leave me alone with all this stuff about Europe’. I believe this is one
of the key challenges, namely raising awareness at the municipal level. (I 11, LINE 155)

In line with this argument, Thomann and Sager argue that domestication rather than Europeanisation takes place when the requirements imposed by the EU do not match national policy preferences (Thomann & Sager 2017). This may be due to the fact that in soft law policy the EU has only a few direct possibilities to implement issues in concrete terms or to encourage the member states to implement them. Soft law conclusions and recommendations are more open to interpretation than hard law directives and regulations and, for lack of sanction options, can be largely ignored by member states if they are not compatible with domestic policy.

Thus, in order for the municipal perspective to be taken fully into account, it is not enough for the European, national or regional levels to strive to embed a pre-defined European stimulus in the municipal context; instead, issues of current relevance at the municipal level have to be taken as the starting point for discussions, both concerning design as well as implementation of EU youth policy. This includes the link between those designing policy, those implementing policy and those policy is intended for. General issues and implementation problems of municipal authorities, as well as issues and problems of young people, should come into focus. The EU Youth Dialogue, an instrument of EU Youth Strategy organising dialogue between young people and European and national policy makers, is a step in this direction when it comes to taking issues of young people into focus (Banjac 2017). In particular with a view to implementing the EU Youth Strategy in Germany, this means abandoning the narrow restrictions of the issues set out within the implementation framework and focusing more on European points of reference that are to be found among young people and at the municipal level.

Thirdly, we consider a mutual acceptance of perspectives between the levels as being a crucial condition for municipal anchoring to function. Taking account of the municipal perspective can only be successful if it is clear what benefits and what added value a European point of view can offer in terms of the work being done by municipal actors (I 455, line 25). Such added value may lay in policies, administrative arrangements or institutions used at the European level or in other member states in order to implement policy (Dolowitz & Marsh 2000, pp. 5). As ‘peer learning’, this idea has been adopted as an implementation tool in the Open Method of Co-Ordination. In the EU Youth Strategy, peer learning is therefore one of the main instruments for implementation (Council of the European Union 2018). In the German implementation process, this idea has received only little attention in practical
implementation, despite the importance that individual actors have attributed to it. In addition, Bryson et al. (2015) point out that through peer learning and the mutual acceptance of perspectives, new “windows of collaborative opportunity” can emerge (Bryson et al. 2015, pp. 653). However, this also implies continuous negotiations and discussions between the levels in order to act on emerging topics.

Making visible the importance of both a European added value for the domestic debate and of Europe as a place of learning for the different levels needs active support. What is more, the relevant issues and their consequences in terms of policy measures at the municipal level not only have to be identified but also subsequently put into practice. Starting at the municipal level, a transfer is required up to the European level. It is only by means of this type of transfer that issues and processes can be incorporated, acted on and interlinked. In this way, the cooperative aspect of German child and youth welfare mentioned at the beginning of this article once again becomes the key focus. The results of the evaluation of the EU Youth Strategy implementation in Germany stipulate that youth policy in Germany and Europe depends on cooperation between the various levels. As the reciprocal effects between these levels extend further than previously realised, an interactive approach is imperative.

Municipal Anchoring – a Look Ahead

The findings of the evaluation show that municipal anchoring of EU youth policy was initially conceived of and intended as a collaborative process based on the ‘coordination principle’, with the involved actors willing to cooperate between levels and between governmental and non-governmental actors (Baumbast et al., 2015). It followed the idea of multi-level governance, in which non-governmental and governmental actors from different levels are simultaneously involved in policy-making, creating non-hierarchical networks of governance (Piattoni 2010, pp. 83).

Over the course of time and practical implementation, elaboration of this principle shifted to become what is primarily a ‘multiplier’ process. The challenges actors faced were conditioned by both structural aspects (the formal responsibilities and authorities at the various levels) and specific circumstances (in this case, the approach of individuals dealing with municipal anchoring). This resulted in an EU Youth Strategy implementation process in which the municipal level found itself in a reactive rather than a proactive situation. This reactive situation was identified by the evaluation as a factor causing a defensive attitude to Europe as an ‘add-on’ issue at the municipal level.
The analysis thus shows that the involvement of the municipal level in European youth policy, or more specifically in the national implementation of European youth policy, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, there is an awareness among actors that the municipal level should be involved. On the other hand, actors find it difficult to ensure that the municipal level is really involved beyond a representative function. This may be due to a gatekeeper function of both federal and state levels. Not only do they filter European impulses to the municipal level (Eising, 2016; Bache, 1999), but also municipal discussions to the European level (Hofmann-van de Poll et al., 2020). The involved actors are to a certain extent aware of this function and explain it due to federal responsibilities following subsidiarity. At the same time it becomes apparent that acknowledgement of this functions forces actors to think beyond the present situation and to think of new forms of cooperation reducing this gatekeeper function. Still, falling back into old patterns of behaviour or withdrawing to formal responsibilities is a remaining problem (Hofmann-van de Poll & Pelzer, 2018).

For a successful aproachement and in the best case an interlinking of the different political levels, with the aim of strengthening ‘Europe’ in child and youth welfare, our evaluation suggests several possibilities with regard to municipal anchoring of European youth policy. It is vital that efforts on the part of the EU to develop a European youth policy are based on the existing practice of youth policy in member states. There needs to be a sense of mutual understanding and a systematic, regular dialogue between the different political levels, which gives rise to concrete strategies and measures being jointly agreed on and put into practice. It is crucial for all actors to ensure that each level conveys its perspective clearly to the others. This also means that a closer interlocking between the European and local levels should be striven for, especially an interlocking taking place apart from the indirect and representative channels via regional and national levels.

After all, the efforts to implement European youth policy are not intended to be an ‘add-on’ burden, but should rather contribute to increasing the quality of the work being done, strengthening child and youth welfare and ultimately contributing to the well-being of young people in Europe. Pursuing such a goal of strengthening the topic of Europe and anchoring it at the municipal level on a broad scale will take time and a certain measure of perseverance on the part of all actors involved. In the years to come, it will be important to build up and expand content-based stimuli, as well as finding new ways to achieve mutual understanding and cooperation.

Consequently, our analysis has several implications for future research.
First, our research has shown that Europeanisation in an area of soft governance, such as EU youth policy, is neither a simple top-down nor a bottom-up process, but is rather based on interaction and interlignement between all levels. The study has shown that if the interests and challenges of the municipal level are not taken into account, implementation of EU youth policy has little chance of success. Our research thus contributes to the relatively new ‘shaping and taking’ debate in Europeanisation research (Börzel & Panke 2016, pp. 119). Further research, interlinking top-down and bottom-up processes and the mechanisms such interlinking would need, would be enriching to the development of Europeanisation discourse.

Second, our research pointed out the difficulties between responsibilities and subsidiarity in federal states at the one side, and ideals of multi-level governance at the other side. Attempts to combine both – at least as far as this single case study of municipal anchoring of European impulses is concerned – have rather failed. In contrast to studies on hard governance, where implementation is imperative and can be asserted by the EU, policy fields of soft governance are governed by non-binding implementation mechanisms. Cooperation between the different levels is inevitable in order to be able to constitute municipal anchoring of European impulses and European anchoring of municipal and regional impulses. It would be interesting to continue here and take a closer look at cooperative mechanisms between administrative levels in areas of soft governance.

Finally, as the scope of our findings is related to Germany, it would be worthwhile to pursue the question of implementation and anchoring of European strategies in the field of soft governance, contributing to further development of multi-level governance approaches, by contrasting and extending our case with other states and policy fields.

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