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# Multi-Level Governance and Participation: Interpreting Democracy in EU-programmes

## Abstract

This article offers an ethnographically oriented, interpretive approach for the research into the democratic qualities of multi-level governance (MLG). The complex and networked MLG arrangements, such as the EU's participatory policy practices, are changing the traditional roles of public administration and politics in ways we cannot yet fully foresee. Especially, the impact on democracy is subject to debate. With two case studies, this article seeks to shift the focus of the discussion on the democratic possibilities of MLG from theoretical analysis to empirical research into local and mundane experiences concerning EU policy implementation. The cases studied are the rural development programme LEADER and the youth policy programme Youth in Action. The studies suggest that the participation of NGOs or individual citizens cannot automatically be seen as a counterbalance to administration since the participants seem capable of adopting technocratic or administrative identities and roles. In addition, participatory practices may be geared to impacting on the participants instead of functioning as their democratic opportunity to impact on governance. Therefore, the paper suggests that the assessments of democracy should not only concentrate on the formal status of the participants: a credible democratic legitimation requires both the possibility and the will to act politically.

Keywords: political ethnography, Interpretive Policy Analysis, European Union, LEADER, Youth in Action

## Introduction

Jacques Delors called the European Union “an unidentified political object”. Indeed, the processes of European integration are changing not only how we understand the role of nation state but also how we understand administration, politics and democracy, and in ways we can't yet fully foresee. One of the most profound parts of this development concerns the shifting practices of government and politics described with the concept of multi-level governance (MLG) (see Gamble, 2004). This change does not only apply to Brussels but it is visible in local contexts too. For example in Finland, there hardly is a branch or level of administration that is not affected by EU-governance and the practises it produces. MLG creates complex networks and partnerships in which interaction, bargaining, participation or other political games between various public and non-public actors are

enabled. Understanding this complexity – as well as the cultural differences between member states – requires such methods that are open to diverse perspectives and local experiences. This paper offers an ethnographically oriented, interpretive approach that focuses on the local and particular, thus, seeking to build new understanding concerning the participatory practices of EU’s multi-level governance.

The fuzzy structures and the informal practices of MLG are sometimes seen as a threat to democracy. Conversely, the improved possibilities of participation attached to MLG have been evaluated as a democratic opportunity offering alternatives for the parliamentary and representative modes of accountability. However, most of the discussion on governance has so far been theoretical and there is a clear need for empirical examinations (Pierre, 2009, p. 54; Hanberger, 2008, p. 18). This article asks whether participation in EU programmes could be seen as a democratic opportunity when examined from the perspective of grass-roots. Are participatory MLG arrangements indeed a threat to democracy or can we expect “safety in numbers”, that is democracy through enlarged participation? In addition to these questions, we discuss what kind of contribution ethnographic and interpretive approaches, which focus on the level of local and particular, could give to the debate on the democratic possibilities of MLG.

We seek to answer these questions with two case studies that focus on two different fields of EU governance: the programme of rural development, LEADER<sup>i</sup>, and the youth policy programme Youth in Action. The cases are selected among EU-programmes, which are central in their respective sectors and which depict the current dynamics of MLG. The cases are interesting examples of the partnership mode of action and thus they highlight tendencies common to many MLG arrangements. In addition to the apparent goals regarding rural and youth policies, both programmes are geared to enhance citizen participation. Both cases illustrate how the examination

of grass-root understandings and experiences concerning policy implementation may open new views on governance.

Firstly, we will discuss the democratic expectations linked to MLG and specify our research question on the basis of the debate. After that, we are going to discuss ethnography as interpretation of local meanings and argue how it can be applied in the research of politics and EU-policy.

Thirdly, we will present two empirical case studies into the LEADER and the Youth in Action programmes. The first case highlights how seemingly democratic practices may reveal multifaceted when examined at the level of everyday, thus emphasising the need for understanding local experiences in evaluating the democratic qualities of policy participation. The second case stresses that the participative practises of MLG may involves such innovation that is difficult to grasp with our conventional understanding on participation. In the last section, we will present our conclusions.

### **The Prospects of Democracy in Multi-Level Governance**

The concept of multi-level governance refers to the changing modes of governing and the changing position of nation state in a post-Westphalian world (Gamble, 2004, p. v). It suggests, firstly, that decision-making involves increasingly non-state actors such as NGOs, private businesses and even individual citizens. Secondly, the identification of distinct territorial levels in decision-making is becoming increasingly difficult because of the complexity of the resulting networks. Thirdly, the role of state actors is changing and states are adopting new ways of coordination. It has even been said that with MLG, politics may be escaping the control of states. Fourthly, the democratic accountability previously attached to states' representative systems is being challenged as decision-making is moved to the complex and multi-actored networks. (Bache and Flinders, 2004, p. 197.)

The idea of multi-level governance originated from the EC's structural policy reform in the late 1980s when the principle of partnership was introduced in the context of European policy (Bache, 2010, p. 63). MLG connotes mostly a change in the mode of governing from hierarchies and legal frameworks towards cosy, collaborative, informal and inclusive policy processes. These processes include ways of ruling through negotiation and ad hoc arrangements that involve political games between autonomous agents. The absence of hierarchies and legal frameworks as well as the informality of procedures are seen mostly to enhance efficiency in governance, as an improved problem-solving capacity, for example. (Peters and Pierre, 2004.) Yet, as Peters and Pierre formulate it, MLG can be seen as "a Faustian bargain" in which democratic accountability attached to the states' legal frameworks and hierarchies is traded for the alleged efficiency of governing.

Peters and Pierre (2004) assume that formal rules and legal frameworks often serve equality and protect the powers of the weaker parties. The informal patterns of political coordination typical to multi-level arrangements may in fact be a strategy for strong political interests to escape or by-pass the requirements of accountability and thus they might undermine democracy. Peters and Pierre conclude that the best way of escaping the Faustian bargain is to supplement the informal MLG arrangements with such regulatory settings that would allow the weaker actors a legal basis for their action.

A more optimistic view on the dilemma of democratic legitimation and efficiency in MLG is given by Rosenau (2004, p. 46). His notion of 'safety in numbers' suggests that the more pluralism increases the less any sphere of authority or rule system is able to dominate the course of events. Even if there probably will always be individual unsuccessful, autocratic or malfunctioning MLG arrangements and networks, these will be 'hemmed in' by a multitude of others. The sheer number of actors will

force stronger players to conform to a more co-operative and thus a more democratic mode of action.

While the complex and multi-actored networks of MLG may both enhance and diminish democratic accountability, its actual impacts should be studied empirically rather than assumed on general or theoretical grounds. For example Bache and Chapman (2008) have conducted a study on the implementation of the structural funds in a region in England from the perspective of democracy. Their study suggests that there are possibilities of an enhanced democratic accountability in this specific instance of MLG, especially where EU policy connects most directly to its citizens. However, such local complexities are also revealed that make ultimately optimistic interpretations problematic. (ibid., pp. 414-15.) Hence, the research into the democratic qualities of MLG should not disregard local contexts. Also others have seen ethnographic approaches as the road to understanding politics in networks and in other innovative policy practices (Bevir and Rhodes, 2007, p. 85; Rhodes, 2000, p. 85).

Instances of MLG are new ways to involve citizens in the policy making and implementation. They produce new frames for civic participation and the relation between citizens and administration, thus blurring the boundaries of state and civil society. Moreover, the relation between participation and democratic legitimation is often paradoxical in this kind of involvement. In this article, we examine the democratic potential of MLG by paying attention to the messy local realities of participation. We particularly emphasize the political aspect of democracy. Because politics is inherently conflictual, also democratic governance networks should implicate and deal with political differences in an atmosphere of agonistic respect (e.g. Bache and Chapman, 2008, p. 400). Yet, we do not assume – as many previous examiners seem to do – that an opportunity to participate

is automatically a democratic opportunity but suggest that the participants and the meanings they give to participation should be lifted at the focus of research.

### **Ethnography as interpretation of politics**

Ethnography has been defined a set of methods that produce historically, politically and geographically well placed or contextualized descriptions, accounts and interpretations about human action (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). It may be considered as a mode of research in which a direct contact is established and sustained between the researcher and the agents. It means systematic witnessing and recording of human events and describing them at least partly with the agents' own terms and concepts. (Willis and Trondman 2000, p. 5.)

Yet, ethnographic research does not only mean a detailed description of what “happens on the field” but rather it is an attempt to understand the discursive layers of meaning that guide action. For example Geertz's (1973) ‘thick description’, in addition to recording details, seeks to understand the conceptual structures to which individuals are tied. Ethnography in this sense strives to understand the meanings which the agents give to the world and their own action. As an interpretive endeavour, the value of ethnography is not in the ability to find undisputed facts from the field, but in its ability to clarify what the actions mean from the perspective of the actors. Instead of a realist theory of knowledge, ethnography follows a hermeneutical way of explanation. It is an effort to understand different, or indeed strange, ways to perceive the world. (see Gadamer, 1986.) Ethnography functions as a mediator between two worlds: it shows how action or events that may seem strange or illogical to us, can actually be seen reasonable. It allows the possibility to challenge obvious interpretations, popular fancies, or prejudices. (Agar, 1986 p. 12, 48–49; Bohman, 1991, p. 137.)

Even if ethnography is still in its infancy in EU-studies (Busby, 2013, p. 204), it may offer valuable methodological tools for the social constructivist understandings on European integration. These kind of theoretical positions do not see identities, interests, norms and subjectivities as materially given but, instead, understand these as consequences of collective processes creating meanings. Social constructivist examinations seek, for example, to explain institutional change by focusing on “social ontologies”: how meanings, discourses or identities are created and how these processes are reflected in policy choices. (see Rosamond, 2010; Christiansen et al., 2001; Kauppi, 2003; Nițoiu and Tomić, 2013.) The perspectives of language use, rhetoric and symbolic politics are central to the constructivist research agenda. In addition, ethnographic approach fits well to another aspect apparent for the constructivist examinations: the focus on micro-level or bottom-up political life without trying to form a grand-theory of European integration (Busby, 2013). Such analyses supplement or challenge high-politics approaches to integration by changing focus on every-day political action.

This article proposes an ethnographically oriented approach for the examination of multi-level EU governance. Previously, ethnography has been applied by political scientists in the fields of International Relations (Vrasti, 2008; Lie, 2013), and nationalism or nation building (Cerwonka, 2001), for instance. However, here we take advantage of Yanow’s (1996 & 2000) and Shore & Wright’s (1997) approaches to the political studies of policy.

According to Shore and Wright (1997, p. 17) the ethnographies of policy aim to replace such meanings that are taken for granted. They seek to make visible current, discursively constructed boundaries and become aware of their contingent and historical nature. In this sense, ethnographies of policy seek to politicise such discursively constructed ideas that impact policies. They increase the possibilities of contestation and debate in a democratic polity. Therefore, Shore and Wright



(1997) clearly treat administration as a political phenomenon, which makes their approach useful also for examining the political aspects of policy participation.

Another similar approach to ethnographically oriented political research of policy is Yanow's (1996; 2000) Interpretive Policy Analysis. She treats policies as human and culturally motivated action as well as instrumentally rational. Elements included in policies (such as legislation, practices or fields of expertise) are seen as socially or linguistically constructed objects, as expressions of certain culturally bound meanings. They are seen to express certain values, emotions, traditions, beliefs etc., but also forms of rationalization (e.g. scientific discussions) that give policies their credibility. (Yanow, 2000, p. 8; Yanow, 1996, pp. 222, 224.) The point of the interpretive analysis of policy is above all to explain policy through understanding these meanings, by examining policy as a cultural object. In addition, it studies how these meanings are spread between different audiences and interpreted on different spheres or levels of administration (Yanow, 2000, p. 14). Policies are not, thus, seen as expressions of universal reason, or uniform and monolithic machineries producing certain outcomes, but rather as contingent assemblages consisting of various actors and of differing and even controversial elements such as varying objectives, ideologies, spheres of expertise and legislation (see Li, 2007).

Through ethnographic observations a researcher can search for ruptures and tensions between what one expects to see in a policy field and what one encounters. An important difference to more conventional modes of policy analysis is that the researcher does not assume to stand outside the object of her study: she does not possess the right perspectives on policy. On the other hand, it is equally important not to give any explanation or a group of actors a privileged position of expertise: the right to dictate the true meanings or ideas. Rather, interpretive analysis wants to politicise, to find various forms of inherently rational reasoning. Thus, each actor is considered as an expert of

his/her particular situation whose personal ideas and experiences should be taken seriously. (Yanow, 2000, p. 14.) Nevertheless, adopting this kind of approach requires certain distance to the object of study: it must be seen as “anthropologically strange”. It necessitates relativizing hegemonic ideas or even the researcher’s own expectations.

In other words, the interpretive approach to policy deliberately seeks to transgress the immanent rationalities that shape policies. Instead of understanding a single mode of rationality as universal, it assumes that different ways of reasoning are relevant and even likely among people acting in different roles in policy assemblages. This transgression of immanent rationalities, as well as ethnographic field work, distinguishes the interpretive method from more conventional ways of examining policies. The interpretive approach enables us to examine policies as political action and thus politics is not explained with institutions. Instead, it seeks to show how institutions actually function at the level of grass-roots and every-day: How they legitimize their positions? How they rationalize? What kind of strategies they deploy?

### **Participation and EU-programmes**

In this section we will present two cases of hands-on interpretive research into participatory EU-policy programmes in Finland. The first case concerns the EU’s participatory rural development scheme LEADER. It shows how seemingly democratic practices may reveal apolitical when the observer is present in actual policy situations, thus emphasising the need for understanding local interpretations in evaluating MLG. The second case studies the interpretations of participation in a local project funded by the Youth in Action programme. The case highlights that the participative practises of MLG involve such innovation that is difficult to grasp with traditional approaches to politics and that local or policy specific interpretations about participation cannot only be reached

by observation but also through interpreting relevant “naturally occurring data” such as texts by various actors involved in policy. Both cases are based on material produced in the actual activities of the programmes, policy documents and participant observation. In addition, thematic writings by participants and actor interviews are used.

### *LEADER*

The birth of LEADER can be dated back to the year 1988 when the European Commission published a communication (European Communities, 1988) to the Council and to the Parliament suggesting the launch of a new initiative in rural development. LEADER was at first implemented through three successive Community Initiatives, and since 2008 it has been the fourth axis of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). Instead of granting farming subsidies, LEADER aims to enhance the economic, cultural and social development of rural society in general. It is based on participatory ideas of development and planning, and implemented through autonomous organisations, Local Action Groups (LAG). It is easy to see LAGs as instances of MLG, since they are cross-sectoral partnerships, with territorial (sub-regional) development strategies encouraging innovative approaches to rural development. LAGs are also locally controlled and enhance international cooperation. (Nousiainen, 2011, p. 17.)

The principles of bottom-up and local empowerment have been taken seriously in the implementation of the LEADER approach in Finland. This is visible, first of all, in the composition of Local Action Groups. The fifty-six Finnish LAGs are legally third sector actors, registered development associations in which anyone can become a member. Each LAG prepares a local development plan for its operating area and the plans are implemented with public funding. The LAGs have the authority to make binding decisions in the implementation of their plan, for

example, about which projects will be funded. The power to grant funding to individual project applications has, nevertheless, been divided between LAGs and regional government authorities (ELY-centres) so that LAGs make decisions concerning the usefulness of individual projects and the ELY-centres concerning their legality. LAGs also have permanent offices and employed staff of 2–4 persons. Despite the emphasis of local empowerment, EAFRD and the national programme (Rural Development Programme for Mainland Finland) set the guidelines for what the local LEADER plans should deal with and also set detailed rules on how the money can be spent.

The executive body of a LAG is the board and it is elected by the members of the association in the Annual General Meeting (AGM). At least in principle, any citizen living in a LAG's area can, thus, become a member of the development association and even get elected to sit in the board. The board has a tripartite structure: 1/3 of the board members represents public authorities (mostly municipalities), 1/3 represents local NGOs and 1/3 represents “ordinary” citizens, i.e. people who do not belong to any of the other two quotas<sup>ii</sup>. Consequently, we can think that the empowerment of larger societal groups has been “built in” in the composition of the Finnish LAGs. Most of the decision-makers in LAGs are indeed rural residents and many are even laymen in policy matters.

The general composition of Finnish LAGs seems to protect the weaker participants. Since LAGs are associations, each board member (as well as each association member in AGM) has formally an equal amount of votes. Furthermore, the tripartite practice of the LAG boards could be seen as a legal framework that privileges weaker actors, local NGOs and “ordinary rural residents”, vis-à-vis local governments, since it gives them two thirds of votes in decision-making. Therefore, the tripartition could be seen the kind of formal framework Peters and Pierre (2004) called for as a possible solution to the Faustian bargain. Because of its localness and inclusiveness, LEADER has indeed been evaluated as a novel form of local democracy – in Finland as in other countries as well.

Writers such as Pylkkänen (2004), Karhio (2000), Pylkkänen & Hyyryläinen (2004), Kull (2008), Godenhjelm et al. (2012), Wade & Rinne (2008) and Ramos & Mar Delgado (2003) have discussed LEADER as an experiment of democracy that renews or supplements the representative political system and possibly provides accountability through enhanced participation. However, the grass-roots level participants' understanding on the significance of the LAGs role and the meaning of tripartition, may be more multifaceted – as we will demonstrate with an ethnographic case study.

This analysis is based on a PhD study on LEADER action in grass-roots level in Eastern Finland (see Nousiainen, 2011). As a part of its field work, some participant observation was conducted mostly between October 2007 and June 2008 in a LAG. The group in question was rather an ordinary Finnish LAG representing seven municipalities and the population of some 55 000 rural residents. During the field work period, the researcher took part in the every-day work of the LAG: for example AGMs, board meetings, and ordinary routines in the office. The role of the observer varied from a silent participant in official board meetings to a “ground level” aid to the LAG employees. In board meetings, an outside observer, did not have a possibility to participate in discussions (or indeed the right to vote) but in other occasions, such as strategy meetings, AGMs or other public events, the researcher sought to act as any actor in the LAG. Also informal discussions with the actors were an integral part of the method. The foremost objective was to observe and describe political speech situations where differences between interests or ideological positions would be revealed and dealt with. However, it was quickly revealed that such situations were quite rare, and instead innovative “administrative” understandings and subjectivities linked more to efficiency than politics became evident. In addition to observation, 18 more formal, semi-structured and recorded interviews were conducted with LAG employees and board members in four different groups. The following description on the local politics linked to the tripartition is mostly based on

observations made in two LAG board meetings in October 14<sup>th</sup> and December 12<sup>th</sup> 2007, an AGM held in December 12<sup>th</sup> as well as interview discussions.

In the actor interviews, tripartition was not a planned topic, but it was discussed since some of the interviewees wanted take it up. Yet, none of the actors saw it as a democratic practice protecting the powers of the weaker parties, but rather it was described as an incomprehensible bureaucratic hindrance. The demands of the tripartition were seen as difficult to fulfil since ordinary rural residents – people who are not active in other associations or politics and who, nonetheless, would be interested in participating rural development – were difficult to find. Or, it could be seen as a matter of efficiency as it forced LAGs to renew their working culture. Another surprising explanation was given by an experienced LAG manager who defined the tripartition as a mechanism protecting LAGs from unwanted participation such as “hostile takeover”. Since a LAG is a participatory organisation that makes binding decisions about the allocation of public funds, such possibility is conceivable at least if the general public remains passive. This seems to be the case with LEADER and therefore the need for such a protective practice may be reasonable.

How tripartition actually works as a protective mechanism was revealed through the observation of a process of electing the local representatives to the LAG board. In autumn 2007, the Ministry of Agriculture sent an ultimatum (as it was called by the actors) to the LAGs saying that no person should sit in a board more than six years successively. This regulation limiting the board members’ ‘term of office’ should also be made official by making the respective change in the LAGs’ by-laws. For the LAG in question, this meant that nearly all of the experienced board members had to be changed in the next AGM. This new regulation was discussed in a board meeting, and it became the general consensus that the tripartition makes the AGMs’ task of electing boards a very difficult one: the election of any person to the board necessitates electing respectively two other board

members in the other quotas. Also the representation of different municipalities as well as gender equality was seen important. Therefore, it was not seen plausible to expect that the AGM would be able to fulfil the demands of tripartition without a careful preparation work. At least, each new board member should be asked for their agreement beforehand. In the meeting, the participants also contemplated the composition of the future board and also the candidates' competencies and character in addition to their position in the tripartition. For example, a possible candidate for the next LAG chairman, who was known to be competent and inventive, was taken up.

In the next board meeting, held in the same day as the AGM, the new board was decided upon. The LAG manager told that she had contacted three possible new chairmen, of which only one had given his permission. Therefore, there was no question who would become chosen. Also the other board members were already known. A number of suitable persons had been asked for their permission and some changes were made just a couple of minutes before the beginning of the AGM.

The actual election of the local representatives was a very relaxed occasion; coffee and traditional Finnish Christmas pastries were served. About twenty of the LAG's total three hundred members were present: the old board, most of the new board and a handful of others. One of the participants (a municipal rural development officer) was selected to act as the chairman in the meeting without a discussion. It is evident, thus, that the organisers had asked him to act as the chairman beforehand. Apparently, this was of crucial importance since the success of the LAG depended largely on his ability to steer the meeting to the desired end.

The chairman sat in an armchair in front of the participants and sealed decisions by banging his fist against armrests. When the time came to elect the new chairman for the LAG, an ex-board member

nominated the only candidate. Since no other proposals were made – during the ten seconds’ silence that followed – he was chosen. After that, the list showing the names of the suggested board members was reflected on a screen. The nominated board members (those who were present) each stood up and gave a short “election speech” saying a few words about themselves and their competencies and how they related to rural development policies. Some words were also spoken about those who weren’t present. No changes to the list was proposed and the chairman declared the decision made. At the end of the meeting the chairman, who also won a seat in the board, thanked the participants for a co-operative attitude.

It seemed that the AGM actually had very few possibilities to impact the composition of the board. A participant even compared the occasion, jokingly, to the Russian presidential election that was a topical piece of news at the time. It in fact was the old board, instead of the AGM, that chose the successor for itself. Had the participants made changes to the proposed list of decision makers, the LAG would possibly have lost its budget frame. It was also emphasized in the meeting that even if the LAG was legally free to make decision according to its will, wrong kind of decisions might cause sanctions on behalf of the Ministry. Rather than a real one, the election of the LAG board seemed like a symbolic act of local control or democratic accountability. Or, it could be seen as a ritual that was performed in order to secure a rural development budget of some six million euros to the region. And even the participants seemed to recognize that the act was performed in order to satisfy the Ministry of Agriculture as the jokes about predictable elections suggest.

Furthermore, it was precisely the tripartition-practice, and the complexity of its implementation, that gave the LAG employees and the board members the possibility to select the core participants in advance. Instead of functioning as a mechanism enabling political contestation, it made it possible to hand-pick competent (or otherwise useful) persons to act as local representatives. The



need for such mechanisms was explained in two interviews by LAG managers. They both presented vivid narratives describing the difficulties caused by “trouble-makers”, such core participants who were not suited for the task that requires certain technical administrative capabilities or at least a co-operative character.

What is relevant for MLG in this brief case-study is the complexity of local realities. Similar perspectives were also noted by Bache and Chapman (2008). In grass-roots contexts, the significance of individual policy practices or regulations cannot be assumed on general grounds. To understand what a “regulation does” at the level of everyday, it is necessary to speak with the practitioners and to be present, if possible, in actual policy situations. This applies also to the democratic possibilities of policy participation: even ordinary and non-public participants do not necessarily understand themselves as political agents – i.e. as representatives of constituencies or ideological positions.

### *Youth in Action*

The second case analyses the meanings of participation in the multilevel EU-governance through examining Youth in Action programme, and a project funded by it, SAGA. The research material is produced in the activities of the programmes and received from the project managers and the participants. It consists of a PowerPoint presentation and disposition papers by the leaders of the project, the final report of the project, as well as texts written by participants. These texts are reflected against policy documents by the EU institutions. Such naturally occurring data actually produced for the purposes of the policy – in this case the SAGA-project – may give a more authentic picture of meanings given to participation than material produced for the purposes of research (Silverman, 2007).

Youth in Action -programme is an EU-tool for funding youth exchange, youth initiatives and activities concerning young people's participation in democratic life and in voluntary activities. The funding can be applied for young persons aged between 15 to 28 as well as non-profit projects and communities and those active in youth work and youth organisations. The general aims of the programme are framed in democratic terms. The goals are “to promote young people's active citizenship in general and their European citizenship in particular”, to foster solidarity, tolerance, social cohesion and mutual understanding among young people in different countries as well as to develop youth activities and civil society organisations and European cooperation in the field.<sup>iii</sup>

The project selected for this case study is called SAGA – Storytelling as a Key to Cultural Identity and European Citizenship. It received funding (49 945.00 €) from the Youth in Action -programme in 2011-2012. Fifty-five persons aged mainly 18-25 from eleven countries took part in the project. The main activity of the project was a meeting in Iceland in February 2012. The core content of the eight day meeting was a participatory method called storytelling. It was applied through various exercises in order to deal with the themes of citizenship and identity in five workshops.

In a Power Point –presentation designed in the project, storytelling is represented as a way for “[l]earning to express ourselves through stories and to be critical of what we hear”. In the presentation, performance and spreading message are mentioned as aspects of storytelling.

In the disposition of the workshop called “Me, myself and I”, the idea was to examine the role of the storyteller. The workshop material presented an illustration with concentric circles in order to give the facilitators of the workshop ideas of what kind of themes they could offer for the participants to use in their stories.

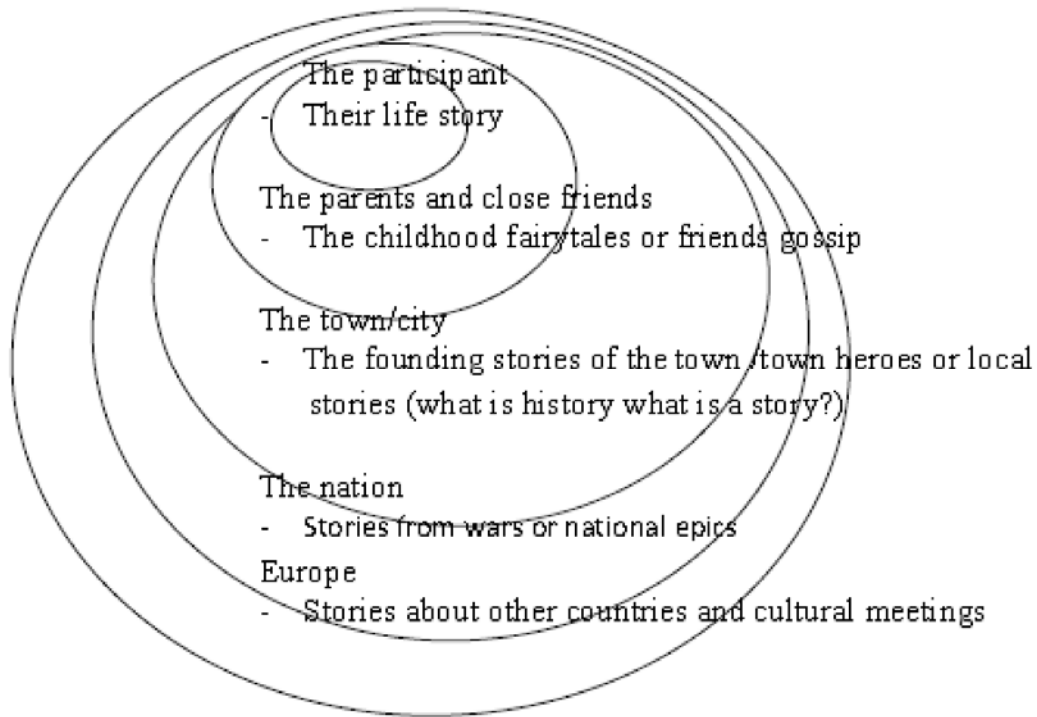


Figure 1. An illustration from the disposition paper for the workshop “Me, myself and I”.

Through the image, participants were asked to think about “stories that make up their lives”. In the core of the picture, we find the participant. The next “level” represents participant's parents and close friends. The following circles represent the local, national and European levels. Thus, the illustration constructs a trajectory from personal to public and shows European Union as the largest scale of experience and encourages participants to transform their perspectives for more European. Stories about international interaction are suggested as a dimension of a European identity – not displacing but completing the continuum of identities.

In the disposition paper, a similar exercise called “The crane flight” was suggested to be used in this workshop.

“*The crane flight* [A method to look at the perspective of the storytellers role in the big picture] When a crane takes flight to migrate, it first flies low and maps the near surroundings of the nest. Then it flies higher and maps the nearby surroundings and it flies higher and higher until it sees the large picture and can figure out the right direction.”<sup>iv</sup>

In this metaphor, the change of perspective is described as a way to find something new. “[T]he right direction” can only be found by looking from far. The goal of changing perspective, here too, points to the recognition of international interaction and a European identity.

Exercises in another workshop, “Folklore and traditions”, repeat the model of changing perspective and exchange in order to find both differences and commonness. In this workshop, according to the disposition paper, the aim was “to acknowledge the role of the epic stories in forming the concept of a nation”. The constructed nature of “nation” is thus recognised. The disposition paper of the workshop hints that heroes of the stories could be interpreted as “perfect citizens” and “the idealization of the perfect representative of your nation”, linking citizenship with nationality like often in nation state traditions. The exercise encourages the participants to compare the characteristics and values of heroes in different stories. After the national topics the participants are encouraged to “try to work out the hero of Europe=the perfect European citizen” and to imagine his/her epic story. The disposition paper suggests that the workshop could be finished with hearing and drawing the story about Europe as a maiden carried away by Zeus in ox form. The workshop, thus, constructed an image of a nation-like Europe, a community with its own mythical stories, heroes and origins.

Yet another workshop was dedicated explicitly to European citizenship. According to the disposition paper, the themes of this workshop were migration, racism and unemployment. Participants' task was "to find one traditional story that deals with the mentioned issue". In addition, values were discussed in the workshop. An exercise designed for this topic suggested that participants are divided into country groups, and that each country group chooses three values (among a set of values collected earlier in the workshop) which suit their own country.<sup>v</sup> These exercises suggest that stories are not only applicable to myths constructing community, but as well to addressing social problems and sharing values as elements of European citizenship. They also show how in the SAGA project social concerns were in the centre of citizenship.

All the SAGA-workshops repeated the model of changing perspective from individual and local levels to European level. All of their exercises can be seen as grass-root applications of the central objectives of various EU-programmes in general: exchange, bringing people together and intercultural learning (Mäkinen, 2012, pp. 273-274). The workshops can be interpreted as opportunities for learning about cultures in other member states as well as about what might be "common" or "European". In the final report of the SAGA-project, the managers summarized the storytelling practice as an instrument for exchanging stories and finding similarities and thus a way to construct European identity. The report confirms also that the methods had worked: "Participant's said they felt that they learnt new things about the different cultures present, through the different stories." The whole idea of the project was, in fact, about exchange: to develop storytelling as a tool for sharing.

It is not possible to reach sufficient information about the participants' experiences through reports or other project material. Instead, the participants' experiences are studied here through texts written by the participants themselves. In these texts, the central themes were the connections with

other participants as well as the contents of the SAGA-project, storytelling. Both of these are connected to participants' personal life.

“I simply didn't want to leave those amazing people, and weeks after I was still kind of sad not to be there. (---) I must say that the project and future projects simply changed me. I came home like, I could speak enthusiastically in front of my whole high school about this amazing experience, and that people should do it! Since the projects I haven't had any trouble presenting in front of people I've just met, nor in front of a big group. (---) I really feel like that project changed myself (---) being in the sphere of people with open minds and hearts is just priceless, and I cannot recommend more. The storytelling workshops that at that time might didn't look like I'm ever going to use it, turned out to become the greatest knowledge!”<sup>vi</sup>

“Me, myself and I' it was very beautiful and instructive because we learned how we can tell stories to each other in an alternative way; the words sometimes are not necessary. (---) It's very useful because I improved my English but especially I met special people.”<sup>vii</sup>

Both of the participants underline their own personal experience in the project. For them participation meant a personal possibility for learning and meeting new people rather than European integration as such. The first quotation especially emphasises how participation can represent a profound personal change in various aspects of subjectivity.

Nevertheless, the context of the European Union is present in participants' texts, too. Personal and European intertwined together through the emphasis on the social aspect of the project.

“One of the Hungarian participants said it very clear: “the EU doesn't [care] about the theme and what we are doing – it's networking, so that you will get to know people from all Europe”. Knowing that no--  
-matter where I go almost in the world, I know someone where I could get a bed, or a good guide, or someone knows someone. A network so strong is just priceless!”<sup>viii</sup>

This text shows that the participants are aware that “the EU” is interested in their experiences and wants to influence in them. The interpretation here is that the substance and forms of the project are secondary to a higher goal: “networking” in a very concrete form. Networking can be seen as a way to produce European elites, and follows Jean Monnet's ideas that integration proceeds through personal interaction and networks.

The SAGA project as well as the exercises in its workshops were designed to produce experiences of European integration through several project practices: coming together, working in small groups, choosing suitable themes for the workshops and framing them territorially, encouraging for changing perspective as well as storytelling as a method of sharing. Thus, the project offered the participants an opportunity for personal change, i.e. to adopt a European identity.

The SAGA case shows how European and personal interests can be aligned through this kind of programme participation. This follows the goal to make EU feel in citizens' everyday lives repeated in many EU-documents.

The participants' accounts indicate that participation in a policy project may indeed have impacts on the participants, changing their subjectivities, but based on the material, it remains unclear whether the participants were able to have an impact on the project or EU's youth policy in general. Citizens' participation in policy projects may thus be a way of addressing the citizens directly, rather than a democratic opportunity for the participants to change the content of the policy or to use power.

The participatory practices of MLG include arrangements which both support and limit possibilities of political agency and thus democracy. They enable the participants to act and to make choices but the participant is also a target of policy – even if the aims are framed in political terms, such as citizenship in the SAGA case. The practice of “storytelling” enhanced democratic citizenship through allowing participants' own voice, but the agenda was pre-given through the exercises. Based on this case-study, it is not visible whether the participants took the political role, which is referred to in the aims and titles of SAGA and the Youth in Action programme.

## **Conclusions**

The two EU programmes analysed in this paper, LEADER and Youth in Action, enable and promote new ways of citizens' direct participation in European governance. Even if these cases do not allow simple generalisation to other instances of participatory governance, they suggest that multi-level governance may indeed be a Faustian bargain between alleged efficiency and democracy, but in different ways that Peters and Pierre (2004) could predict. Not even formal procedures and legal frameworks geared to privileging the weaker parties, such as the tripartition in LEADER, may suffice, if people do not adopt political identities and roles when acting in governance networks, and especially if the general public is uninterested. Even if the legal frameworks may provide the possibility for politics, they cannot rule out the unwillingness to act



politically. This means, first and foremost, that local and voluntary participation cannot automatically be seen as the counterbalance to administration since even ordinary citizens and non-public actors may adopt technocratic subjectivities and thus consider practices of democratic accountability irrelevant. In other words, there is no safety in numbers at least when we discuss individual governance arrangements: if participants themselves do not consider their role as political, participation – no matter how wide and broad – may have very little to do with democracy, understood as the political legitimation of power. Therefore, when evaluating the democratic character of MLG, it is not enough to concentrate in the formal status of the participants.

In the multi-level EU governance, certain practices of participation may differ from the conventional understanding on politics, as apparent in our second case. Rather than changing the policy, participation may be designed to changing the participants' views. And, as the testimonies from participants indicate, such practices may also be successful. Instead of being a citizens' democratic opportunity, participation may as well be a way of addressing individual citizens to fulfil pre-set political goals.

These conclusions open the path for a pessimist version of Rosenau's (2004) "safety in numbers" thesis. Rosenau's optimism set aside, it is equally possible that, in MLG, the democratic and pluralist modes of action are the ones to get 'hemmed in' by technocratic and administrative workings. This means that political subjectivities may be replaced with such experiences of participation that do not support public discussion on political differences. Such remarks have also been made by others. According to Wolff (2013, p. 261), the European Commission seems to promote a version of democracy that means working together to solve pre-defined policy problems instead of conflictual politics. Should this kind of understanding on participation become an

ordinary part of citizens' every-day experience, it would not only concern specific governance arrangements but might undermine the possibilities of politics in representative settings, too.

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<sup>i</sup> *Liaisons Entre Actions du Développement de l'Économie Rurale*

<sup>ii</sup> Since the LAGs are formally NGOs, their members have no legal obligation to follow any regulations concerning the composition of the boards. Yet, the tripartition has been imposed on the LAGs on basis of the contract each of them

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makes with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. This contract also gives the LAGs their public budget to administer.

<sup>iii</sup> Decision by European Parliament and the Council establishing the Youth in Action programme for the period 2007 to 2013 Official Journal of the European Union L 327, 24.11.2006, pp. 32-34.

<sup>iv</sup> Disposition paper received from the SAGA project coordinator.

<sup>v</sup> Cultural Identity and European Citizenship Workshop Report. Received from a workshop leader.

<sup>vi</sup> Thematic writing by a participant. Received from the participant.

<sup>vii</sup> A feedback text by a participant. Received from the project coordinator.

<sup>viii</sup> Thematic writing by a participant. Received from the participant.