

UACES 45th Annual Conference

Bilbao

7-9 September 2015

***Institutionalization of
Multi-Level Governance:
comparative cases of CoR and CLRAE***

Rusen Yasar

PhD Candidate
University of Cambridge
Department of POLIS

(For circulation purpose only, please do not cite)

Introduction

Multilevel governance (MLG) has become one of the central concepts of contemporary European integration theory. Defined as 'the dispersion of authoritative decision making across multiple territorial levels' (Hooghe and Marks 2001, xi), MLG draws on two theoretical pillars. First, the 'governance turn' in EU studies (Kohler-Koch and Rittberger 2006) observes that the European governance is characterised by the increasing role of a variety of state and non-state actors in the decision making (Hix 1998). In this respect, governance approach to European integration differs from previous theories in that it takes 'Euro-polity' as the independent variable to study policy consequences as opposed to the main integration theories such as neo-functionalism and liberal intergovernmentalism which take it as the dependent variable (Jachtenfuchs 2001). Second, MLG is based on the idea that EU has become a *sui generis* form of polity that cannot be understood with older theories (Schmitter 1996). Accordingly, European political reality does not pertain to a system whereby existing political units are neatly nested within larger units, but one of complex interconnectedness within and across levels (Marks, Hooghe, and Blank 1996, 346).

In this regard, taking regionalization as a parallel development to European integration (Bache 2008, 21), MLG is particularly attentive to phenomena including horizontal relations between political units as well as the vertical relations across levels. Nonetheless, while regionalism and European integration can be argued to be in a mutually reinforcing relationship, the latter setting the international context and creating opportunity structures (Christiansen and Jørgensen 2000; Loughlin 2001, 7; Sodupe 1999; Soldatos and Michelmann 1992), horizontal and vertical relations within and across territorial levels are not necessarily limited to the context of European integration. Similar subjects have been studied with a broader focus through concepts such as para-diplomacy (Aldecoa and Keating 1999), or multi-layered policy (Hocking 1993). Against the background of globalization, the rise of such multi-level political activities can be attributed to three major factors: weakening of nation-states, rise of transnational institutions and changing motives of sub-national actors (Keating 1999). MLG theories follows an analogous logic in that it takes European institutions and upward and downward transfer of competences from national level as central factors (Marks, Hooghe, and Blank 1996), yet it is not as interested in sub-national actors' attitudes and opinions.

The aim of this paper is to reconsider MLG within the broader context of multi-level political activities of sub-national actors (SNAs), relying on a framework which incorporates macro-structural or systemic evolution, institutional patterns and attitudes of actors. It will argue that European institutions such as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (CLRAE) occupy a crucial place in this three-dimensional framework, as an embodiment of the rising multi-level system which influences the actors' attitudes in the direction of more favourable opinions on this relatively novel form of politics. The apparent similarity of these institutions in terms of influencing actors' attitudes towards MLG will be explained by framing their differences as the embodiment of distinct yet crucial and complementary dimensions of MLG. The argument will be supported by quantitative and qualitative empirical evidence which takes into account both the variation between members and non-members of such organizations, and the variation between different types of institutions. The next section will develop this account theoretically from a new institutionalist perspective. The second section will present data from a Europe-wide survey conducted with sub-national political actors. The third section will continue the analysis at institutional level in the light of qualitative data drawn from interviews with the members of CoR and CLRAE.

An Institutional Approach to Multi-Level Governance

Having established the main analytical interest in institutions, it should be useful to begin the theoretical discussions with a conceptual clarification of its content. A non-exhaustive but sufficiently comprehensive definition would describe political institutions as patterned higher-order effects, including rules, standards and structural factors, which can constrain, shape or constitute the behaviour of actors without necessary repeated intervention, which endure over time, but which also evolve and adapt to changing circumstances (Clemens and Cook 1999, 444–445; Ostrom 1986, 3–4). This definition entails both formal and informal aspects of institutions, while the main focus here is on organizations as formal institutions. Although many institutionalist scholars tend to distinguish institutions from organizations, describing the latter as collective actors and purposive or physical entities (North 1990b, 4–5, 73; Young 1986), organizations also generate their own institutional environment to which individual actors are exposed (Zucker 1987). The focus here will be on organizations, mainly CoR and CLRAE, as formal institutions to be scrutinized, with an emphasis on the pattern of behaviour that their institutional context generates.

Such a focus on both informal and formal aspects of institutions is one of the central tenets of new institutionalism (Ethington and McDonagh 1995), an umbrella theory consisting of three main variants in the form of historical, rational choice and sociological institutionalisms which offer insights on the origin, stability, evolution and effects of institutions (Hall and Taylor 1996; Immergut 1998). To begin with institutional origins, historical or social embeddedness and functional inception for concerns of efficiency come to the fore as basic determinants (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 1995). In other words, the coming into existence of an institution is determined exogenously by its pre-existing context, while this indicates a change in this context which necessitates the inception of a new institution. In this sense, the emergence of the institutions of MLG can be attributed to some transformation in European political system, and as its natural result, they can be seen as the institutional embodiment of this transformation¹.

The political context which precedes MLG is the Westphalian system of national sovereignty, and globalization is put forward as the biggest challenge to it. In this respect, the conception of a rising multi-level political system at the expense of weakening nation-states suggests a structural transformation which can be captured by concepts such as global-local dialectic (Hocking 1999). It can be argued that national sovereignty persists as a result of institutional inertia despite changing environmental conditions to which the institutional arrangement of sovereignty has become a sub-optimal response (Krasner 1988). A more prudent explanation is, nonetheless, that the evolution of sovereignty manifests itself in the form of 'pooled sovereignty' of EU member states (Keohane 2002). Thereby, the structural transformation which paved the way for MLG refers to a hybrid coexistence of old and new forms of governance marked by increased degrees of choice and flexibility instead of a strictly hierarchical one (Loughlin 2009). This does not constitute a zero-sum substitution for the old system but it is rather the emergence of novel forms of politics to supplement the old ones. This kind of transformation, conceptualized as 'layering' in historical institutionalism (Mahoney and Thelen 2010), does not necessarily destabilize the existing or new institutions, but instead makes them

1 Describing CoR as an institutional embodiment of MLG is not new (e.g. Warleigh 1999), yet this presumes a focused approach on the relationship between sub-national and supra-national levels, which is adopted here. An additional contribution of the present paper is the consideration of CLRAE in a similar light.

more entrenched by increasing the complexity of the overall institutional arrangement (Boas 2007).

Different interpretations of the idea 'Europe of the regions' provides a useful illustration for this rather modest transformation. It is difficult to accept this idea as a viable prediction of the future of European integration in a strong sense of European federation where regions are primary constituent units (Borras-Alomar, Christiansen, and Rodriguez-Pose 1994; Elias 2008; Hepburn 2008). In a weaker sense, 'Europe of/with/for the regions' refers to sub-national actors utilizing emerging opportunities to increase their importance at European level, through common patterns despite varying backgrounds, competences and objectives (Hooghe and Marks 1996; Loughlin 1996a; Moore 2008). Yet what is both a new form of politics and a common feature among sub-national actors is multi-level activities outside of national channels. National contexts are of course an important determinant, but they remain one option among others, and in order to observe institutional innovation, one must look at the layers added to pre-existing options. In addition to national channels, two other major forms of engaging in MLG appear to be direct representation in European institutions such as the Committee of the Regions (CoR) and channels which remain outside of formal organizations such as external offices of sub-national authorities (Hooghe 1995; Marks et al. 1996; Tatham 2008).

Although it can be argued that national institutions provide the most effective channels (Bomberg and Peterson 1998; Jeffery 2000), these are only available to sub-national actors who already are domestically powerful. Moreover, even if a high level of domestic autonomy would be considered as necessary, it is indeed not sufficient, and sub-national actors need a favourable international environment for efficient multi-level engagements (Agranoff 2004; Philippart 1998). On the other hand, for actors to whom national channels are not available, bypassing national constraints become the only option (Hooghe 1995). Whether state bypassing is the only option or one option among others depending on domestic competences and sub-national objectives, its very possibility shows that nation-states no longer assumes a gatekeeper position (Blatter et al. 2008; Tatham 2010). As for other institutionalized forms of multi-level political activities, external offices do not constitute an option fully independent from national contexts, partially because such activities require adequate funds which in turn depends on the domestic position of the sub-national authorities (Blatter et al. 2010; Marks, Haesly, and Mbaye 2002). Representation in formal organizations such as CoR and CLRAE, however, offers the chance of direct representation equally to all sub-national authorities. In that sense, they constitute the most suitable cases whereby the structural transformation towards a multi-level system can be observed².

Institutions come into existence to serve a purpose which is, according to the rational choice perspective, ensuring collective action equilibria among diverging preferences, which cannot be reached otherwise (North 1990a, 1990b; Riker 1980; Shepsle 1979). The establishment of CoR cannot be understood without due regard to the importance of sub-national authorities to European integration. On one hand, structural funds administered at sub-national level make a considerable part of the EU budget, on the other hand, approximately 70% of EU legislation has a direct impact at sub-national level. Thereby, involving sub-national actors is required to increase the efficiency of

2 In fact, even within such organizations, domestic powers of sub-national authorities could become influential on their relative position vis-à-vis other members. For instance, during the fieldwork conducted for qualitative interviews discussed below, it was observed that politically and economically more powerful sub-national authorities can utilize their Brussels offices for activities related to CoR as well. Yet, formal organizations are still the best approximation of an equitable representation.

European level decision making. The case of CLRAE within a more conventional intergovernmental organization is relatively controversial. Yet it should be noted that CoE works for democracy and human rights, for which local and regional democracy has been deemed essential. Once this has been accepted, not involving sub-national actors on the subject of local and regional democracy would be undemocratic in itself.

One of the defining characteristics of institutions is endurance which is very likely insofar as they continue their functionality. Yet they can still endure irrespectively of efficient outcomes due their path dependent nature, which is especially true for political institutions (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000a, 2000b). For instance, although CoR was recognized as a product of strengthened supranational institutions of EU and general tendency towards decentralisation in the evolving systems of member states (Loughlin 1996b), the majority of its early evaluations were pessimistic (Christiansen 1996, 1997; Christiansen and Lintner 2005; Jeffery 1995; Van Der Knaap 1994). Nonetheless, one of the pointed sources of weakness is the selection of delegates by member states, which in fact proved to be an only procedural aspect over time³. Moreover, unanimity and party-political alliances overweighted national divisions (Hönnige and Kaiser 2003), while the impact of CoR activities has become visible in EU legislation despite lack of formal powers, it improved its intra-institutional relationships with other bodies of the EU, and it has proved to be a valuable bridge between sub-national and supra-national level (Farrow and McCarthy 1997; McCarthy 1997; Warleigh 1997). Meanwhile, CoR acquired the formal power to appeal to the European Court of Justice on issues related to subsidiarity, transcending the status of a merely advisory body.

On the other hand, the historical background of CLRAE dates back longer in time, and in that sense, it is the result of another specific institutional entrenchment. It was established with a statutory resolution and a new charter as a successor to the Standing Conference of Local and Regional Authorities of Europe which had drafted the European Charter for Local Self-Government in 1985, arguably the most important international document concerning local government, and one of the central responsibilities of CLRAE is the supervision of the implementation of the Charter (De Castro 1999; Schneider 1994). In other words, the entry into force of the Charter has paved the way for CLRAE to come into existence as a permanent part of the institutional architecture of CoE.

Finally, institutions are crucial with regard to shaping the behaviour of the actors. One of the distinguishing contribution of historical institutionalism is its emphasis on how institutions shape the distribution of power and resources (Hall 2010). The rational choice perspective takes actors' preferences as externally given and assumes that institutions do not influence their preferences, but shape the way they pursue their interests by providing effective means. In contrast, sociological institutionalism claims that institutions socialize actors into existing norms and define the social roles which are deemed appropriate, hence influencing both their perceived interests and the way they pursue these (March and Olsen 1984; Powell and DiMaggio 1991). Overall, all variants of new institutionalism agree that institutions exert some influence over actors, but they do not agree on the degree and type of such an influence. In the cases of CoR and CLRAE, the institutional effects on sub-national actors are largely unknown. This paper thereby aims at offering insights from a new institutionalist perspective completed by the relationship between the levels of institutions and actors. Adopting an eclectic approach,

3 The general tendency is to make the selection of delegates through autonomous national associations of local and regional authorities which oversee the fairness of rotation. In countries which have a sufficiently high number of seats, it is often the case that the highest tier is completely represented with remaining seats rotating among lower tier units.

it will assume that three variants of institutionalism explain different aspects of political reality, and thus they are complementary rather than rival.

In this respect, it can be expected that the influence of such institutions would be in the direction of more favourable views on MLG. Following this, it can be hypothesized that, overall, the more the actors are in contact with institutions, the more they will display positive attitudes towards MLG. As for the specific aspects, first, the most relevant forms of power redistribution to MLG are domestic devolution and further European integration. Thereby, it can be hypothesized that the actors' opinions on these subjects should be in line with MLG in general. Second, actors can be expected to have favourable views on MLG to the extent that they consider its institutions as effective means of conducting political activities, as a preferable alternative to direct relations and national channels. Third, the way they perceive their roles as a political actors, or their forms of political identification beyond national boundaries, should be related to their attitudes towards MLG. Although this conceptualization of different aspects of institutional effects allows for testable hypotheses as formulated above, there is still room for suspicion on the centrality of institutions, as they may be nothing more than epiphenomena, that is, side effects of more fundamental conditions which directly result in the outcomes which are thought to be related to institutions (Przeworski 2004). For this reason, particular attention will be paid to the variation between areas of institutional influence and non-influence within the same broad population of European sub-national actors. In other words, sub-national actors who have been members of transnational organizations are subject to an additional institutional context while they share more fundamental institutional characteristics with others. In addition further discussions on the comparative case study of CoR and CLRAE will also provide insights for a variation between types of institutions.

To conclude the present section, the broader context of MLG described as the weakening nation-states, rise of transnational institutions and changing motives of sub-national actors has been mapped appropriately from a new institutionalist perspective which brings together factors from macro-structural, institutional and actor levels. While existing studies and general observations confirm intuitively the theorized relationship between institutions of MLG and their environment, and the institutional innovation that they embody and the level of durability that they achieved, further empirical research is needed in order to make more confident assertions about the relationship between such institutions and sub-national actors. Following sections seek to accomplish this task.

Empirical Study of Institutional Effects

The variables conceptualized as above have been operationalized and measured through an online survey tailored to the objectives of this research. Accordingly, as the main dependent variable, attitudes towards MLG have been measured as the additive index of Likert scale level of agreement with five statements which pertain to a generic understanding of multi-level political activities, namely representation in transnational organizations, direct relations with foreign sub-national actors, recognition as subjects of international law, recognition as main actors of European politics and autonomy from national constraints in foreign competences. Furthermore, separate Likert scale opinions on the concepts of multi-level governance and subsidiarity were also added. As the main independent variable, whether respondents are members of CoR, CLRAE or another international/transnational organization has been coded.

Regarding different aspects of institutional effects, for the transfer of competences upward and downward from national level, respondents were asked to state their opinions

on the strength of European institutions and domestic competences of sub-national authorities in different dimensions which add up to two respective indices. For other aspects, they were asked to state whether they consider transnational-institutional, direct and national channels of conducting MLG are effective, whether they define themselves as local/regional, national, European, ethnic/cultural and ideological politicians, whether they receive European funds and whether they think European funds are important for local and regional development. Several demographic factors were also measured, including age, gender, education, political position on left-right scale, country and type of sub-national authority. Variables with indexed scores have a range of 1-to-5, and all other variables are dichotomous.

The survey was conducted in six different languages across all members of the CoE where contact information of sub-national actors are available. Due to varying response rate, the final dataset cannot be claimed to strongly represent all countries which were intended to be covered. Among EU member states, Hungary, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria and Latvia are not represented with a sufficient number of observations, and among non-EU members only Switzerland, Iceland and Norway are reliably represented. Small numbers of respondents from countries with low response rate are still kept in the dataset, categorized as 'other countries' still distinguishing EU membership. The final dataset has the size of 802 observations. Moreover, since sampling clusters based on countries are the main predictor of response rate, the bias which would result from this is minimized through weighting calculated according to the population size of each country. All statistical estimates generated from the complete dataset are adjusted for these weights.

Overall, the contents of the statistical model consisting of these variables are the result of the hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework discussed above. In addition, as a methodological consideration, this model has also been constructed with a hierarchical strategy, testing the significance of the change in its explanatory power with each added variable. The final model which will be discussed below is the largest one after which adding variables does not significantly improve the explained variance. As a result, the eventual model includes the variables listed in Table 1, but excludes several variables which represent alternative explanations to the hypothesized ones such as national channels of external relations, local and national political identification, and receiving European funds. Demographic variables are kept in the model for control purposes. With the exception of the variable measuring whether the respondent's sub-national unit receives European funds which is indeed only a supplementary but not a rival explanation, the statistical insignificance of the excluded variables imply the accuracy of the theoretical framework of the empirical model.

The results of the OLS model summarized in Table 1 confirm the majority of hypothesized associations with few exceptions. Accordingly, membership in a transnational organization increases the chances of sub-national actors viewing MLG in a positive light; the estimated effect of such a membership is about 10% of the total range of scores measuring views on MLG. Next two variables affirm that the views on the upward and downward transfer of powers away from national level are parallel to those on MLG. However, views on domestic competences display a stronger association with 1 unit change corresponding to 0.42 unit change in the dependent variable on an equivalent scale, against 0.17 in the case of stronger European institutions.

[Table 1 about here]

Rationalistic expectations on positive association with the assessment of European funds as important and transnational institutions as an effective method of conduction external relation are also confirmed. Yet the effectiveness of direct relations, which can be seen as an informal institutional counterpart, also appears as a significant factor which presents itself as a complementary method rather than rival to transnational institutions with a smaller effect on the dependent variable.

As for sociological aspect, European political identification results in an insignificant estimate, contrary to theoretical expectations. It should be noted that this finding is in line with several studies on European organizations which cannot confirm a significant level of socialization into a specific European political role (Egeberg 1999, 2004; Hooghe 2005)⁴. However, this finding does not support the hypothesis that such a low level can be attributed to factors pertaining to national sphere (Beyers 2005), since national political identification does not present a significantly negative association. On the other hand, political identification with a cultural or ethnic group and with an ideology or political party are significant although they were not part of the theoretical framework. The former present the importance of a sense of distinctiveness at national sphere as an extra-institutional factor which seems unrelated to European institutions.

The latter presents a more controversial result with a negative association, albeit relatively small. A further inspection of the data does not reveal any difference in terms of ideological inclination on the left-right scale between those identify themselves with an ideology and those who do not. Therefore, this should be accepted as an indication of generic strong commitment to ideological or political party positions possibly being against favourable views on MLG. However, another variable measuring solely ideological self-positioning reveals that those who see themselves in the right-wing are more likely to display negative views on MLG. This is probably due to the higher propensity of nationalistically inclined political actors to place themselves in the right.

In order to focus on the type of European organizations, Table 2 summarizes the difference in the same model where only the variable on institutional membership is replaced with three dummy categories showing the effect of membership in CoR, CLRAE and another organization against no membership. None of the remaining variables displays a visible difference from the first model. Nonetheless, the interesting finding is that CoR membership results in a marginally insignificant ($p=0.07$) and lower estimate than others, although CLRAE and other membership categories remain similar to the first model. Intuitively, CoR might be expected to display the strongest relationship, since it is part of the EU which is the most powerful European organization, it is thus more likely to be associated with material benefits of MLG, and it functions through quite frequent meetings, among other reasons. When comparing membership categories among themselves, the differences in their mean scores of views on MLG are not statistically significant, even when isolated from the rest of the model (Table 3). Meanwhile, the unweighted difference of CoR and CLRAE from other organizations is larger than weighted means⁵.

4 It should be remarked that the model used here is different from the arguments of cited studies; the aim here is not to measure the effect of institutional membership in identification, but to evaluate them as parallel factors. Still, similarly to the cited studies, the present model finds that European identification does not have the expected explanatory leverage in European institutions.

5 Unweighted statistics are also considered here because weights were calculated with respect to the country distribution of the overall sample which is likely to be different in the subsets of sample by institutional membership type. The difference between weighted and unweighted statistics imply the possibility of variance at country level, which is not addressed here for

[Table 2 and Table 3 about here]

Despite evident differences in the institutional characteristics of CoR and CLRAE, their effect on sub-national actors seem to remain at the same level. Unless such differences are irrelevant, CoR and CLRAE must have comparative advantages which lead to more favourable views on MLG in distinctive ways. Empirical analyses discussed so far rely on quantification which cannot capture such details. For this reason, possible explanations for the relevance or irrelevance of institutional differences will be discussed in the next section in the framework of an in-depth comparative case study.

Opinions from Inside CoR and CLRAE

CoR and CLRAE can be seen as very similar cases in that both organizations are consultative bodies of major European organizations which represent sub-national interests at supra-national level. Their virtual similarities also include a parliament-like functioning with regular plenary sessions which discuss drafts prepared by task-specific committees or commissions, and organization of political positions along two lines of national delegations and political party groups. Nonetheless, there is still room for variation in these dimensions, and thus they are not going to be taken as constant across cases, but they will be discussed alongside apparent differences. The following discussion aims to develop a comprehensive explanation which accounts for their commonalities and differences in these specific dimensions, by considering the information available from original sources of CoR and CLRAE as well as the insights offered by interviewed members of both organizations⁶.

First of all, CoR and CLRAE are situated in distinct institutional architectures within the larger environment of European politics. As the parent organization of CoR, EU is based on a strong emphasis on common market and supra-national policy making, comprising of 28 member states. Meanwhile, CoE is an intergovernmental organization whose purpose is the promotion of human rights and democracy in larger Europe with 43 member states. In that sense, it is difficult to expect a significant European level of MLG in the latter case. However, while the mission of CoR is more inclined towards policy making at European level, CLRAE focuses on improving democracy at local and regional level. In the same vein, CoR's work addresses in large part other bodies of EU to represent sub-national interests, but CLRAE appeals to national governments with regard to sub-national levels of government. Although this can be seen as a weakness of CLRAE regarding continuing predominance of the national level, the strengthening of sub-national authorities can be put forward as a more crucial requisite for MLG as compared to that of European organizations⁷. Thereby, the distinguishing feature of MLG for CoR is the presence of a European level, and its comparative advantage is another locus of power with which it can cooperate. The comparative advantage of CLRAE, on the other hand, is increasing the likelihood that sub-national authorities have the necessary competences

reason of space.

6 These qualitative data were gathered through 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with the members and the staff of CoR and CLRAE. The majority of interviews took place between March 2015 and June 2015 in face-to-face format whereas one respondent answered questions via telephone and one other via e-mail. The answers were summary-transcribed and will be interpreted anecdotally.

7 The stronger association of decentralization with views on MLG as compared to European integration found in the model can be put forward as an empirical corollary of this claim.

and means for external political activities. At the same time, they both play the role of facilitator which brings together sub-national actors in European fora.

In this regard, relative strengths of CoR and CLRAE lie in European and sub-national levels respectively. It is a widespread idea among the interviews that MLG is also a principle of territorial organization of nation states, which is more accurately embodied by CLRAE's approach. According to a German interviewee from CoR, on the other hand, MLG is well illustrated by the German federal political system while the inclusion of the European level is an extension which meets the rising importance of the EU. Even though the innovative capacity of MLG can be distinguished mainly by the presence of European level, the fact remains that the priority of sub-national actors lie with their constituency, hence stronger emphasis on decentralization gives CLRAE an advantage in terms of appealing to sub-national level. For instance, when comparing two organizations, an interviewee affirms that CoR does not possess 'the expertise of the Congress on fundamental analysis of local democracy' while it derives its legitimacy from its 'positioning within the European Union's decision-making process'. On the other hand, EU has proven to be a force behind regionalization trend in Europe, especially through structural funds which are administered by regional governments. Interviews with members and staff of especially newer member states revealed clearly that EU membership was a strong incentive for decentralization in the context of post-communism. Yet this factor seems to have lost its prominence for later stages of membership, making EU membership an indirect factor of decentralized decision making.

Nevertheless, in other dimensions, CoR seems to be based on a stronger institutional context than CLRAE by objective criteria. For instance, CoR plenary sessions meet six times a year, while the frequency of CLRAE plenary sessions is 2 per year. Second, not only the frequency of committee and commission meeting is proportional, but also the number of such committees and commissions is higher in CoR with a significantly larger number of policy output. Third, organization along the lines of political party groups has a greater leverage in CoR, allowing the possibility of autonomous activity from national positions. For instance, the appointment of rapporteurs, which is a crucial determinant of the content of opinions, is decided through a point-based system with respect to relative powers of party groups. Moreover, party groups in CoR has a permanent presence providing continuous cooperation among members, whereas in CLRAE both party groups and national delegations hardly go beyond one-time meetings before plenary sessions. An experienced member of both organizations stated the non-permanent nature of CoR and CLRAE as the biggest challenge, and the permanent coordination by CoR party groups as the main factor which compensates for this challenge. Almost all interviewees admit that party groups constitute the main pillar of affiliation in CoR vis-à-vis national delegations, which cannot be confirmed in CLRAE. On the other hand, delegates to CLRAE have a stronger tendency to value national interests and follow central governments, especially if they come from political contexts where either sub-national autonomy or democratic culture is relatively weak, which has been described by an interviewee as one of the central challenges against open-minded debate in the Congress. But CoR positions itself beyond political issues which potentially entail conflict of interests between national and other affiliations. The most nationally oriented comment from an interviewee in CoR has only mentioned that their national delegation is in touch with the diplomatic representation of their country, but they never exchange opinions on issues to be discussed in CoR meetings.

All these differences can be interpreted as weaknesses of CLRAE vis-à-vis CoR which contradict the finding that they have the same level of influence on their members regarding their opinions on MLG. Yet, these differences can also be interpreted as

extensions of the aforementioned comparative advantages without necessarily embodying weaknesses or strengths. Accordingly, all distinguishing features of CoR are related to its increased specialization in providing input to European level policy making and legislation. In this sense, the discussions which dominate CoR sessions are of a rather technical nature. Political debates do not necessarily focus on the place of sub-national authorities in European politics, and when they do, it is often in relation to a specific policy area. One of the main complaints about the general functioning of CoR according to an interviewee from both organizations was losing too much precious time on hundreds of amendments due to complex voting procedures. In his/her opinion, this time could be better spent on establishing contacts or networking, and 'deep and classical political debate on ideas'.

As an illustration of CoR's changing focus, its emphasis of main mission shifted from subsidiarity to multi-level governance. Although the labels of these concepts suggest a stronger potential for the promotion of MLG as conceptualized in this paper, their contents as conceived by CoR confirm its technical specialization. Subsidiarity is a concept from legal origin with powerful normative connotation to move the locus of decision making to the lowest level possible, hence setting the target of strengthening sub-national authorities as the lowest extremity. On the other hand, MLG is a concept from academic origin with analytic purposes. Its definition based on the dispersion of power upward and downward from national level provides a normative framework which indeed reformulates subsidiarity, yet its reflection in the policy-making environment is concerned with the patterns of relationship between levels of decision making given the existing distribution of powers. For instance, on what MLG means for CoR, an interviewee describes it as 'a proper methodology in decision-making and securing added value of European actions'. The White Paper on MLG published by CoR and the Charter on MLG opened to signature by CoR display this tendency towards the aspect of cooperation rather than dispersion of power. According to an interview, the general tendency in a national delegation on whether the Charter should be signed was questioning the necessity of making this kind of political proclamation with no real political or economic benefit, which points to the pragmatic approach to MLG in CoR circles.

On the contrary, the *raison d'être* of CLRAE relies on normative bases; it is formed around the idea that sub-national autonomy is indispensable to democratic ideals promoted by CoE. In this sense, by virtue of one of the few statutory bodies of CoE, CLRAE brings forward decentralization as a European value alongside democracy, human rights and rule of law. Yet it also seeks real impact through its supervisory role on the implementation of the European Charter for Local Self-Government, which is sufficient to indicate the continuing need for further devolution. The Charter, which calls for better sub-national autonomy, is a text setting norms of international law; in this sense, it is legally binding on national governments, but without any means to overcome derogation on their part or to enforce the implementation. Thereby the recommendations of CLRAE are naturally more normatively oriented, though with a lower chance of being implemented through legal means. Still, members of the Congress are content with the results of their work in general. One interviewee, for instance, mentioned how Austria adopted a recommendation although this was a minor addition to the generally well-functioning of local and regional democracy, and how some post-soviet states such as Georgia and Armenia improve their local democracy incrementally. In this sense, this permanent focus on the improvement of sub-national democracy can constitute a context which is as likely to shape actors' views on multi-level political activities as CoR which is in the path of technical specialization. To a certain extent, thereby, the more political

focus of CLRAE compensates for its apparent weaknesses relative to CoR. In contrast to CoR which loses sight of 'deep political issues', praising depictions by interviewees for CLRAE usually included expressions like 'pan-European "dialogue space"', a forum for open-minded debate, a place to exercise democracy at European level, etc.

In the end, the most recurring themes of the interviews revealed two major widely shared ideas. First, the most important common feature of CoR and CLRAE is that they both provide the valuable opportunity to establish contacts and networks among European sub-national authorities. Second, they are competent in different areas, and it is for the better if they continue to be so. As a side note this, some interviewees chose to emphasize the coordination efforts between CoR and CLRAE, bringing about a new dimension of purposive cooperation. Therefore, despite their differences as outlined in this section, they both embody different but crucial aspects of MLG, and hence institutionalize MLG in two necessary forms.

Conclusion

To summarize, this paper has argued that, from a new institutionalist perspective, organizations such as CoR and CLRAE institutionalize MLG by virtue of innovative and transformative forms of institutional contexts. Furthermore, not only this institutionalization manifests itself in their influence over the attitudes of sub-national actors, but also they do so by following mechanisms posited in the paper such as redistribution of competences and existence of effective means, although it could not be confirmed if they exert a significant sociological influence towards European political identification. In addition, a more in-depth discussion of CoR and CLRAE reveals that they represent distinct but complementary aspects, rather than varying degrees of the same type of institutionalization, each embodying crucial dimensions of MLG.

Tables

Table 1. OLS output for the main model

	Dependent variable: Views on MLG
Membership in a transnational or international organization	0.41 ***
Views on the strength of European institutions	0.17 ***
Views on the domestic powers of sub-national authorities	0.42 ***
Considering European funds as important for sub-national development	0.52 ***
Considering transnational organizations as effective method of external relations	0.67 ***
Considering direct relations as effective method of external relations	0.41 **
Self-description as a European political actor	0.14
Self-description as a political actor of cultural or ethnic group	0.28 *
Self-description as a political actor of ideological group or political party	-0.27 **
Self-placement in 'Left' with reference category 'Centre'	0.07
Self-placement in 'Right' with reference category 'Centre'	-0.34 **
Whether the respondent's country is an EU member state	0.20
Age	0.00
Gender: Male with reference category Female	-0.13
Whether the respondent has a university degree	0.12
Sub-national unit: 'administrative region' with reference category 'local'	-0.02
Sub-national unit: 'legislative region' with reference category 'local'	0.00
Constant	-0.77 *
Observations:	802
Adjusted R ²	0.41
Residual Std. Error:	1.05 (df=782)
F statistic:	30.41 *** (df=19; 782)
Note:	*p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

Table 2. Change in the OLS output with membership types

		Dependent variable: Views on MLG
Membership in CLRAE		0.55**
Membership in CoR		0.25
Membership in another organization		0.47***
(Very close results for other variables)		
Observations:	802	
Adjusted R ²	0.41	
Residual Std. Error:	1.05 (df=782)	
F statistic:	27.69*** (df=21; 780)	
<i>Note:</i>	· p<0.1; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001	

Table 3. Mean scores of views on MLG by membership types

	Weighted mean score of views on MLG	Unweighted mean score of views on MLG
No membership	2.63	2.35
Membership: CoR	3.40	3.31
Membership: CLRAE	3.42	3.27
Membership: Other	3.43	3.07

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