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Perception of Collective Agency and Networks of Relations: The Case of Regional Parliaments in Four EU Member States

*Elisabeth Donat & Barbara Mataloni**

Abstract: »Wahrnehmung der kollektiven Handlungsfähigkeit und Beziehungsnetzwerke: Regionalparlamente in vier EU-Mitgliedstaaten als Fallbeispiel«. Regional parliaments have only limited formal possibilities to engage in the European Union's (EU's) multi-level system of governance. Our paper focuses on networking activities of regional members of parliaments (MPs) as informal attempts to make agency claims and as a main driver for perceived collective agency. We employ a relational perspective, taking into account the various stakeholders and environments which regional parliaments have to deal with in the EU. Engaging in such networks can enhance collective agency since such activity is linked to recognition and can open doors to new resources and networks. We use data from a survey of regional deputies in Austria, Germany, Spain, and the Czech Republic to investigate these associations. The results point to the importance of such activities for the perceived influence of regional parliaments on political decision-making in the region and for perceptions about the future role of regions in the EU. Contacts with European actors prove to be crucial in this respect since they can lead to new, agency-enhancing contacts and resources.

Keywords: Collective actors, collective agency, regional parliaments, European integration, networks.

1. Introduction

The relational paradigm has experienced wide recognition within the social sciences in the last decades (Häußling 2010; Fuhse and Mützel 2010). Besides researching the relationship of structures and actors within this paradigm, agency as a dynamic component has gained much attention within this

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framework and seems to be a promising approach for contextualizing a formerly rather static notion of social relations. While some empirical research has been conducted in the field of individual agency (cf. Bethmann et al. 2012), we are still lacking empirical examples focusing on collective agency. Regional parliaments are interesting collective actors via which to approach questions of agency, we argue, because their historical involvement within the European Union's (EU's) multi-level system of governance has faced many ups and downs; they also provide a valuable example of collective agency evolving in the context of its interdependence with other actors. Regional parliaments are organized, institutionalized collective actors with rather flat hierarchies and formal equality among their members, the regional members of parliaments (MPs). We argue that once a collective actor has been constituted, relations to its environment are crucial for the development of collective agency of this actor. While several contributions of this special issue focus on the internal deliberation and internal relations of collective actors like parliaments, our focus lies on external relations of regional parliaments and their members towards other stakeholders in the field. This approach is complementary in explaining the emergence and perpetuation of collective agency in a dynamic and relational perspective. The involvement of regions and regional parliaments has long been contested by national and supranational actors in the EU. The changing role of regional parliaments in this context allows us to observe the emergence of collective agency and its contested nature very well.

The role of the regional level (i.e., the subnational level) in the EU's multi-level governance system has been contested ever since the EU's foundation. Besides claiming themselves to be actors within the EU, regional actors have gained at least a modest amount of recognition in the last few decades from other more established actors in the field. When analyzing the EU's development over the past half-century, we find the regions to be increasingly prominent entities in the debate about the multi-level nature of the EU (Abels and Battke 2019). Since the 1950s, when Leopold Kohr developed his utopia of a "Europe of the regions" in his book with its indicative title *The Breakdown of Nations* (1957), we find the issue of regional involvement in the EU has been regularly debated and the importance of the regions claimed by various stakeholders. Especially in the 1990s, a "Europe of the regions" seemed to be an increasingly appealing vision for the EU, or at least many hoped this vision would shape the EU's future (Ruge 2003). In the 1990s, after the historic fall of the iron curtain on the European continent, former enthusiasm about EU enlargement quickly diminished and, once again, regional involvement was back on the agenda. In 2007, the principle of subsidiarity was included in the Lisbon Treaty, which gave at least some regions (those with legislative competences) slightly more rights in participating in legislative decisions at the European level (Arribas and Högenauer 2015). Once again, the regional level

was seen as a welcome actor in attempts to combat political fatigue and growing Euroscepticism, driven by the idea to bring the EU closer to its citizens.

This brief history of the changing role of the regions within the EU illustrates the ambivalent relationship of regions and regional actors with the EU. In this paper, we focus on the role of regional parliaments, which must not only reclaim their role as actors in the multi-level governance system of the EU but also withstand the executive dominance over every level of this system. Our analysis is based on a relational approach towards collective agency, which focuses on the networking activities of regional MPs as an important driver for collective agency. Our study is based at the individual level of regional MPs, where we ask about their perceptions of the influence of their respective regional parliaments as collective actors embedded in social networks. Additionally, we consider theoretical approaches to collective agency which discuss future expectations as a source of engagement in the present (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). In our paper, we investigate these ideas by first introducing the theoretical background in relational sociology and current discussions on the nature of collective agency. The examination of the theoretical background helps us derive two main indicators for observing the conditions and consequences of collective agency for regional parliaments in the EU from the viewpoint of their deputies. We then introduce our sample and conduct an empirical analysis. The engagement of regional MPs in networks at the local/regional and European level, as well as the perceived influence of the regional level, serve as major context variables for analyzing the perceived influence of regional parliaments on political decision-making in the region and projections concerning their future role in the EU. Our empirical section consists of bivariate and multivariate analysis and applies a relational perspective where agency is influenced by networking activities and vice versa. Our analysis thus reveals collective agency to be a function of the relationships MPs of regional parliaments find themselves within. We conclude our analysis by discussing our results in the context of our conceptual background, addressing the limitations of our study and making suggestions for further investigations into the collective agency of regional parliaments.

2. Collective Agency – The Case of Regional Parliaments in the EU

Collective agency in a political context can be best described as a debate about “who is allowed to sit at the table” when it comes to political decision making (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022, 2). This following description offers a good explanation of what is meant by the notion of collective agency in the domain of politics: “agency can be described as the ability to act and make choices in

political contexts” (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022, 2). Since the EU’s multi-level governance system consists of many actors at every level, all stemming from different societal spheres and equipped with different sets of competences, rights, and duties, one can easily imagine that the process of integrating new actors is much contested. Furthermore, due to several rounds of EU enlargement, the number of member states has steadily been growing, which makes consensual decisions more complicated, as can be currently observed. This would be even more complicated if the 242 regions currently part of the EU (according to the NUTS 2¹ classification) all insisted on having a major say in political decisions at the EU level. Additionally, integrating new actors entails a rearrangement of competences, which is always subject to discussions and negotiations. For some member states in the EU, the issue of upgrading their regional involvement in the EU is a matter of preserving national entity: regional aspirations for sovereignty, as in the case of Catalonia, might threaten national entities if regions were integrated as new stakeholders with competencies comparable to member states. Nevertheless, the issue of regional representation at the EU level seems to come onto the agenda from time to time, especially as a greater involvement of the regions seems a promising way of bringing the EU closer to its constituency. All of this makes regions, and especially regional parliaments, an interesting case for observing the emergence and contestation of collective agency in this multi-level system.

In this paper we refer to those authors who understand agency as (a) embedded in a relational context and (b) being produced and reproduced by concrete actions and practice (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Hofferberth and Lambach 2022). Concerning its relational nature, agency is nothing actors possess per se or from the outset. Instead, agency is something that always relates to others, be they human agents or structures like material goods, and something which is debated and sometimes even contested (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022). Hence, agency is also an expression of a temporary “locus” in a given structure or network (Stegbauer 2010), although that locus can change position in those networks and structures. Since we assume agency to be relational in nature, we can also think of these relationships as interdependencies (Burkitt 2018, 526). Actors striving for acceptance in these networks, or even attempting to have their say, must first gain recognition from other important actors in the field. This recognition can be either conferred by speech acts or symbolic acts (Bartelson 2013, 110). An actor’s claiming to have agency is already an attempt to gain recognition; agency and recognition are thus to be considered interdependent and mutually reinforcing. The struggle for agency and recognition is never completely overcome nor will it ever reach a timeless, stable position (Hofferberth and Lambach 2022).

¹ *Nomenclature des unités territoriales statistiques.*

Agency and recognition are dynamic in their nature, dependent on others, contested if new actors aim to enter the field and hence not a binary condition of having agency or not, but rather fluid in their nature (Hofferberth and Lambach 2023, in this special issue). This fluidity distinguishes agency from power and authority, argue Hofferberth and Lambach (2022), which are much more stable and fixed to explicit entities.

While network analysis has taught us about the characteristics of certain positions in networks, we are still lacking knowledge about the consequences network positions have for developing orientations for agency (Fuhse and Mützel 2010). A minimal condition for those who occupy positions in networks to evolve agency is, at least, the ability to act and to form preferences which actors strive to achieve (Kärger, Kursawe, and Lambach 2017). Preference building is influenced by experiences from the past, perceptions in the present, and expectations for the future. These temporal conditions should not be taken in the literal sense but rather understood in terms of habit, imagination, and judgement (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Löwenstein 2017; Liang and Liu 2018), which exert influence on preference building. According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 975), “the past is the most resonant tone” since experiences from the past exert a major influence on actions in the present and the future, which may become more or less habitualized. Moreover, these experiences contribute substantially to the formation of meaning, identity, and a sense of a group. Evaluations in the present rely very much on experiences gathered in the past, since humans tend to seek for analogies in the past when forming judgements about the present and the future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Furthermore, the more temporally and relationally complex the present position of actors is, the more they are forced or willing to engage in evaluations and interventions. Although the past is “the most resonant tone,” Emirbayer and Mische (1998, 975) see the future is the most “pressing” aspect when (per)forming agency. The authors emphasize that imagination is the main driver for engaging in the effort to build agency. Imagination can lead to distancing oneself from the past and engaging in creating alternative self-concepts via the construction of hypothetical scenarios, “[...] where they think they are going, where they want to go, and how they can get there from where they are at present” (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 984). Such alternative self-concepts can provide the basis for developing new strategies for collective behavior, social policies, or reorganizing institutions, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue. Since this projective dimension of agency is a major source of motivation for developing strategies and claims, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasize the necessity to include this projective dimension in future empirical research.

Following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), Hofferberth and Lambach (2022, 4) further distinguish between several components of agency: “(1) the capacity to produce or at least influence outcome, (2) the ability to reflect upon

choices based on an idea of the future, and (3) the forward-looking awareness of what consequences might follow from action.” This kind of strategy building is especially crucial if newcomers or outsiders start making agency claims, whether that is entering a field for the first time or taking a more central position. If the outsider position in a network or structure includes elements of a broker position, which is to say access to information, resources, and/or competences gathered through so called “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973), this can give actors in these positions an advantage in designing agency claims and strategies. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) hypothesize that actors in such positions might even be more able to exert control and directivity over their agency claims due to their access to such resources. In our empirical analysis, we examine such kinds of actors carefully, as we attempt to find out more about the impact of networking activities on the perceived influence of regional parliaments in the present and on the anticipated role of regions and their parliaments in the EU’s future.

Having provided the theoretical background to our research on collective agency, we will now turn to the implications of the distinctions outlined above for regional parliaments in the EU’s multi-level system of governance. Especially in the case of regional parliaments, we find a mixture of strategies employed in order to claim a “seat at the table” and to receive (limited) recognition by other actors in the EU’s multi-level system. Hofferberth and Lambach (2022, 6 ff.) distinguish between (1) “delegated” or “granted” rights by established others and (2) self-agentification, whereby actors try to widen their scope of influence and make claims for agency. On the one hand, regions have attempted to exert their influence by opening liaison offices in Brussels (Marks, Haesly, and Mbaye 2002; Studinger 2013; Tatham 2017) or creating lobbying institutions like the European Committee of the Regions (Panke, Hönnige, and Gollub 2015; Piattoni and Schönlaue 2015; Wassenberg 2020). These activities can be described as more informal or subtle in their nature. On the other hand, regions have been successful in making explicit claims for agency which has led to the implementation of the principle of subsidiarity, which conceded to regional parliaments with legislative competences the right to engage in the EU’s decision-making process. Today, there are a myriad of ways in which regions and regional parliaments engage in the EU, and many different aims they pursue with such activities. We can, however, assume at least one common goal from the literature: the regional level, which has lost competences in the process of European integration, and which is in turn responsible for implementing many EU decisions at the local and the regional level, is somehow “united” in its aim to (re)claim at least some voice in EU’s political decision-making process (Grasnack 2007; Schmuck 2020).

In this struggle for agency, regions may pursue various strategies, including cooperating with others, bypassing others (e.g., lobbying separately from

their nation state), or ring-fencing strategies aimed at defending their own sovereignty (Bauer and Börzel 2010; Jeffery 2000). We assume networking activities with “distant” others (i.e., networks at European level) to be of special importance in this sense, since they can open the way for gathering new resources and directly addressing the highest level within the EU. In this contested process, actors have to employ arguments when making agency claims, especially when they are newcomers (Hofferberth and Lambach 2023, in this special issue). As described in our introduction, bringing the EU closer to citizens is frequently used as an argument for strengthening regional voices in EU affairs (Donat and Placzek 2023). This attempt to claim agency has a higher chance of being heard, and being voiced in the first place, in times of crisis or social change (Burkitt 2018; Hofferberth and Lambach 2022). This seems to be the case whenever debates about regional involvement in the EU are back on the agenda, where they are often driven by diagnoses of a democratic deficit in the EU and growing Euroscepticism.

Our empirical analysis concentrates on two core aspects of collective agency from the viewpoint of regional politicians. In the first part of the analysis, we assess the perceived influence of regional parliaments in political decision-making in the region itself. We assume cooperation and networking activities to be one of the main drivers of perceived collective agency (i.e., the ability to influence outcomes). Engaging in networking activities can be interpreted as a sign of recognition by other actors, hence fostering agency, which in turn intensifies networking. In the second part of the analysis, we assess the important role of the future in the context of agency, as we also discussed above. The ability to think in terms of future projections can be a strong motivation to engage in making agency claims. Again, we hypothesize that networking activities play a crucial role in this respect since they imply acts of recognition and might even stimulate actors to engage in building alternative visions through the provision of new resources and information. Once again, this relationship (i.e., between making projections for the future and engaging in networking activities) must not be thought of in a unidirectional way but as recursive since openness to projective thinking can go hand in hand with openness for new contacts and networks.

3. Methodical Approach

3.1 Data and Sample

This paper uses data from a standardized online survey conducted as part of the REGIOPARL project.² The survey asked regional MPs in seven EU

² <http://www.regioparl.com> (Accessed February 8, 2023).

member states (Germany, Austria, Spain, Poland, Czech Republic, Italy, and France) about their parliamentary activities and involvement in EU affairs. The survey included items concerning the use of parliamentary instruments by regional MPs, regional MPs' attitudes towards the process of European integration, and a variety of questions about interactions and contacts of regional MPs at the regional, national, and European level. Data collection took place from November 2020 to December 2021. To reach a sufficient number of participants, all regional parliaments and their MPs were contacted in each country. They received multiple invitations by post, email, and telephone to take part in the survey. The questionnaire was translated into the respective national languages of each country.

The analysis in this paper focuses on four countries: Germany, Austria, Spain, and the Czech Republic. This allowed us to calculate comparable indices regarding the network activities of regional MPs in a previous step.³ The selection includes two federal states in Central Europe (Germany and Austria), a comparatively more centralist country in Southern Europe (Spain), and a comparatively newer EU member state in Eastern Europe (Czech Republic), where regions historically played a minor role after World War II. The response rates from these four countries, which are satisfactory compared to other surveys addressing politicians as a target group,⁴ are reported in Table 1. Overall, our sample can be characterized as pro-European, since it was largely MPs in favour of the EU who took part in the survey. Nevertheless, especially in countries like Germany and Austria, we have been able to reach a substantial variety of participants in regional parliaments across the political spectrum. Our samples in the Czech Republic and Spain are also quite satisfactory when it comes to the distribution of participants across political parties which corresponds to the general distribution of parties across all regional parliaments in these two countries. We can report only minor deviations concerning the gender of participating MPs compared to the general distribution in regional parliaments and no strong differences in the comparative levels of participation of MPs from different individual regions within countries.

Table 1 Response Rates

	Total number of MPs in regional parliaments	Total number of participants in REGIO-PARL survey	Response Rate (%)
Austria	440	315	71.6
Germany	1860	398	21.4
Spain	1208	255	21.1
Czech Republic	735	224	30.5

³ We conducted an exploratory factor analysis before computing indices in order to detect similar response patterns among the participants of our survey.

⁴ Cf. Wonka (2017), who conducted a survey in the German Bundestag yielding a response rate of 16%, and Schneider, Rittberger, and Wonka (2014), who report on a survey among German regional MPs a response rate of 28.5%.

3.2 Variables and Methods of Analysis

In the analyses, we use two single items to observe regional MP's perceptions of the agency of their regional parliament as a collective actor. The first item asked the participants to evaluate the influence that they have as a regional parliament collectively on political decision-making in the region itself. The answer options, on a five-point scale, were: "no influence," "small influence," "moderate influence," "large influence," or "very large influence." The second item required regional MPs to evaluate the likelihood that the voice of regions would gain a greater weight in the EU's future. The answer options were recorded on a four-point scale: "very unlikely," "somewhat unlikely," "somewhat likely," and "very likely." For the multivariate analyses, the scale of this latter item was recoded in a dichotomous format (1 = somewhat likely and very likely; 0 = somewhat unlikely and very unlikely).

To analyse the interdependence between regional MPs' perception of their collective agency and their positioning within networks of relations, three further indicators are used. The first is derived from an item battery that asked regional MPs to evaluate the influence of the regional level in its entirety upon the local, national, and European level on political decision-making in the region. The answer options on a five-point scale ranged from "no influence" to "very large influence." Worth noting is that these subjective evaluations are determined by the rights and competences explicitly conceded to regions, but also by the way in which these competences are used and practiced by the actors themselves. According to Hofferberth and Lambach (2022), this space for action can be described as "ascribed" claims for agency granted by others. The principle of subsidiarity is an example of such ascribed recognition, which states a general affirmation about the importance of all political levels in the EU but, when it comes to concrete measures, concedes only a narrow and situational scope of action to specific regional parliaments (those with legislative competences).

The other two indicators capture regional MPs' networking activities. The survey comprised of an item battery asking the participants to report the frequency of contact with various actors – local/regional, national, European as well as actors in the media and NGOs – in the context of participants attempting to influence European policy in their respective region's interest. The answer options on a five-point scale ranged from "never" to "very often." Exploratory factor analysis yielded a four-factor solution for Austria and the Czech Republic and a three-factor solution for Germany and Spain. Comparable factors for cooperation with local/regional actors and for cooperation with European actors emerged in all four countries. Thus, for the present analyses, the following indicators were created:

- *Frequency of cooperation with European actors* was computed as a mean score index comprising of cooperation with (1) members of the

European Commission, (2) members of the European Parliament, (3) the European Committee of the Regions, (4) each country's regional office in Brussels, and (5) regional parliaments in other EU member states. The reliability of the index, which has a Cronbach's α of 0.82 for the four countries, can be considered good.

- *Frequency of cooperation with local and regional actors* was computed as a mean score index comprising of cooperation with (1) municipal representatives, (2) the regional public administration, and (3) the regional government. The reliability of this index, which has a Cronbach's α of 0.84 for the four countries, is also good.

At the centre of our analysis are the two items capturing regional MPs' perceived collective agency. We first describe the items and then analyse their relationships with regional MPs' relations and networks in a bivariate and multivariate setting. It is admissible to assume that the measurement level of the item "influence of the regional parliament" approximates an interval level of measurement. Thus, we can report Pearson correlation coefficients and results from OLS regressions. The measurement level of the item on the "role of regions in the EU's future" is ordinal. As such, we report Spearman's rank correlation coefficients and results from logistic regression after dichotomizing the scale (1 = somewhat likely and very likely; 0 = somewhat unlikely and very unlikely).

In the bivariate analyses, the responses from the regional MPs from the four countries are considered separately. We assume that collective agency is not given from the outset but emerges in relation to others. The bivariate analyses thus provide the first insights into the interdependence between regional MPs' perception of collective agency and their position within networks of relations.

In the multivariate analyses, we pool the responses from the four countries and implement for "perceived influence of the regional parliament on political decision-making in the region" and "perceived role of regions in the EU's future" two models, respectively. Model 1 tests if the relationships from the bivariate analyses are still observable when the items for regional MPs relations and networks are introduced together into the analyses. In Model 2, we add country dummies to account for cross-national differences. Moreover, we assume that the associations between regional MPs' perception of the influence of the regional level upon other levels are mediated by the context of their respective countries. We thus include an interaction term between this item and the country dummies.

4. Results

Table 2 reports the responses of regional MPs to the item that measures the extent to which they perceive to be able to influence political decision-making in the region collectively as a regional parliament. In the four countries considered, the majority of the regional MPs who participated in the survey evaluated their influence as “large” or “very large.” The share ranges from 72.1% among survey respondents in Czech Republic to 52.3% in Austria. This is also reflected in the mean score, which lies in all four countries above the natural midpoint of the scale. Nonetheless, there are also regional MPs who consider the influence of regional parliament to be small or even to have no influence whatsoever, the highest proportion of whom were among regional MPs surveyed in Spain (19.1%). Quite surprisingly, MPs from the Czech Republic rate the influence of their regional parliaments comparatively highly considering that they are equipped with lower competences compared to the other regions and regional parliaments in our sample. A possible explanation could be that Czech MPs feel empowered by the new opportunities that have arisen for regions, both in their own country and the EU, since the end of communism in their country.

Table 2 Regional MPs Responses to the Item “Perception of the Regional Parliament’s Influence on Political Decision-Making in the Region”

Influence of the regional parliament	No influence	Small influence	Moderate influence	Large influence	Very large influence	Mean	n
	1	2	3	4	5		
AT	0.0	8.7	39.0	42.1	10.2	3.54	264
DE	0.3	8.9	30.1	49.4	11.4	3.63	316
ES	1.7	17.4	23.6	42.7	14.6	3.51	178
CZ	0.0	5.4	22.5	50.4	21.7	3.88	129
ALL	0.5	10.0	30.3	46.0	13.2	3.61	887

While the previous item is more strongly rooted in the present, the second item required respondents to evaluate the likelihood that the voice of regions would receive greater weight in the EU’s future. In relation to this item, the survey reveals a more mixed picture (see Table 3), since the responses balance each other out more strongly. The share of respondents considering it “very likely” or “somewhat likely” that the regions will receive more recognition in the EU is higher among the surveyed respondents in Austria (52.2%) and Spain (46.6%) than in Germany (38.6%) and Czech Republic (31.7%).

Table 3 Regional MPs Responses to the Item “The Voice of Regions will Receive Greater Weight in the EU's Future”

The voice of the regions will receive greater weight in the EU's future	Very unlikely	Somewhat unlikely	Somewhat likely	Very likely	Median	n
	1	2	3	4		
AT	8.3	39.6	43.2	9.0	3	278
DE	14.9	46.5	33.1	5.5	2	329
ES	11.4	42.0	38.3	8.3	2	193
CZ	21.8	46.5	26.1	5.6	2	142
ALL	13.3	43.5	36.1	7.1	2	942

Overall, we find that regional MPs perceive some collective agency for regional parliaments both alone and in the context of their region in relation to future developments. However, univariate distributions suggest that there is some variation in regional MPs' perceptions regarding their ability to influence political decision-making in the region as collective actors and in their projections concerning the future. The following bivariate analyses provide the first insights into the relevance of relations and networking activities in the context of perceived collective agency from the viewpoint of regional MPs. We hypothesize networking activities to be a strong sign of recognition for regional parliaments and their MPs, which allows them to make agency claims in and via those communication channels. Moreover, engaging in such networks can provide important insider information and access to new and/or additional resources, which encourage regional MPs to engage (even more) in such activities and to make claims on behalf of their parliament.

In Table 4, the correlation coefficients with “Perception of the regional parliament's influence” are reported for the four considered countries. The highest significant correlation can be observed for Austria: the more influence regional MPs attribute to the regional level, the higher their perception of their ability to influence political decision-making in the region as collective actors. The correlation coefficient among regional MPs in Germany is of a similar magnitude. This clearly reflects the comparatively strong say that regions have in relation to other levels in federal states, such as Germany and Austria. Nonetheless, also among the regional MPs surveyed in Spain and in the Czech Republic, the two items were significantly correlated, but the strength of the association is lower. In Austria and Germany, when it comes to the respondents' networks, it emerges that frequency of cooperation with European actors correlates positively with regional MPs' perceptions of the influence of their regional parliament as a collective actor: the more often the regional MPs engage with actors at the European level, the higher they deem the influence of the regional parliament on political decision-making in the region. Although significant among regional MPs in Germany, the bivariate correlations with frequency of cooperation at the local and regional level are low in

all four countries considered. A possible explanation could be that engaging at the local or regional level is fairly common among regional MPs and that this field of action is not that much contested or questioned as a driver of recognition.

Table 4 Correlation Coefficients with “Perception of the Regional Parliament’s Influence on Political Decision-Making in the Region” (Pearson)

	AT	DE	ES	CZ	ALL
Perception of the influence of the regional level	0.47***	0.42***	0.23**	0.29**	0.35***
Frequency of cooperation with local and regional actors	0.11	0.12*	0.00	0.10	0.08*
Frequency of cooperation with European actors	0.24***	0.19**	0.03	0.07	0.11**
n	237	268	147	109	761

Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, *p<0.05.

The bivariate analyses with regional MPs’ projections for the future of regions in the EU are provided in Table 5. The highest correlation coefficient is observable in the results from the Czech Republic: the more frequent the cooperation with European actors, the more likely it is for regional MPs to perceive that the voice of regions will receive greater weight in the EU. Although the correlation coefficients are lower in the other three countries, here too, the highest correlation can be observed between these two variables. In addition, among the regional MPs surveyed in Germany and the Czech Republic, cooperation with local and regional actors is positively associated with the role they anticipate for regions in the EU’s future. Interestingly, despite reaching significance in Germany, the perceived influence exerted by the regional level in general manifests only very low correlations with regional MPs’ anticipated role of regions in the EU’s multi-level governance system. Overall, the bivariate analyses thus suggest that concrete activities, such as engaging with other actors at the European, but also at the local and regional level, are more strongly associated with regional MPs’ perceptions of regions in the EU’s future than the perceived influence of the regional level.

Table 5 Correlation Coefficients with “The Voice of the Regions will Receive Greater Weight in the EU's Future” (Spearman)

	AT	DE	ES	CZ	ALL
Perception of the influence of the regional level	0.12	0.15 [*]	-0.07	0.12	0.09 ^{**}
Frequency of cooperation with local and regional actors	0.02	0.20 ^{***}	0.03	0.21 [*]	0.12 ^{**}
Frequency of cooperation with European actors	0.14 [*]	0.24 ^{***}	0.18 [*]	0.35 ^{***}	0.22 ^{***}
n	238	267	147	112	764

Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, *p<0.05.

In a subsequent step, multivariate regressions were calculated for the two variables that are indicative of regional MPs' perception of collective agency when it comes to evaluating the influence of the regional parliament on political decision-making in the region and the role of regions in the future EU. The aim of Model 1 is to model the relationships discussed in the bivariate analyses when all three variables – the influence of the regional level, cooperation with local and regional actors, and cooperation with European actors – are brought together. Since, in the bivariate analyses, similarities rather than differences prevail across the four countries considered, we calculated pooled multivariate regressions. Nonetheless, in Model 2 we introduced country dummies in order to account for national differences. Moreover, we added interaction terms between the perception of the influence of the regional level and the country dummies. This allows us to further explore whether the associations between the items capturing perceived collective agency and the influence of the regional level are mediated by the specific domestic context.

The multivariate linear regressions for “Perception of the regional parliament's influence on decision-making in the region” are provided in Table 6. The fit of the models is moderate and increases slightly when the country dummies and interaction terms are introduced. In Model 1, two significant relationships are observable: regional MPs' perceived influence as collective actors is associated with the perceived “influence of the regional level” vis-à-vis other levels at a significance level of 0.001 as well as with “cooperation with European actors” at a significance level of 0.05. Although in the pooled bivariate results “cooperation with local/regional actors” attains statistical significance (see Table 4), this is not the case in the multivariate analyses. The size of the significant regression coefficients increases in Model 2, which specifies country differences. Only one country dummy attains statistical significance: when compared to the reference category (respondents in Germany), the perception of being able to influence politics in the region is higher among regional MPs in Czech Republic. At the same time, in this group, the attained score seems to be associated to a lesser extent with the

perception of the influence of the regional level vis-à-vis other levels (negative interaction term).

Table 6 Perception of the Regional Parliament’s Influence on Political Decision-Making in the Region. Unstandardized Coefficients (B), Standard Error (SE), and Measures of Fit from Multiple Linear Regression

Variable	M1		M2	
	B	SE	B	SE
Influence of the regional level	0.32***	0.031	0.37***	0.053
Cooperation with local/regional actors	0.04	0.028	0.03	0.028
Cooperation with European actors	0.10*	0.039	0.13**	0.040
Country (ref.: Germany)				
Austria	-	-	-0.28	0.292
Spain	-	-	0.00	0.387
Czech Republic	-	-	0.82*	0.361
Influence reg. level*country (ref.: Germany)				
Influence reg. level*Austria	-	-	0.03	0.077
Influence reg. level*Spain	-	-	-0.08	0.095
Influence reg. level*Czech Republic	-	-	-0.16*	0.090
Constant	2.07***	0.154	1.93***	0.221
R ²	0.14		0.18	
Adjusted R ²	0.14		0.17	
n for all analyses = 761				

Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, *p<0.05, + p<0.10.

The multivariate logistic regression models for regional MPs’ projections about the voice of the regions in the EU’s future are reported in Table 7. Model 1 fits the data significantly better than an empty model ($\chi^2 = 35.74$, $df = 3$, p -value <0.001), but the reported pseudo-R² values are not very high. Model 1 confirms, at a significance level of 0.001, the strongest association between “cooperation with European actors” and the item on the “role of regions in the EU’s future”: a unit increase of cooperation with European actors increases the odds of the scenario in which the regions will receive greater weight in the EU as being evaluated as “somewhat likely” or “very likely” by a factor of 1.53. A unit increase in perceiving the regional level as influential increases the odds but to a lesser extent. While cooperation with local/regional actors is also significantly associated with “the role of regions in the EU’s future” in the pooled bivariate analyses (Table 5), this association can no longer be observed in the multivariate setting. In comparison, Model 2 does not fit the data considerably better than Model 1 ($\chi^2 = 12.12$, $df = 6$, p -value <0.1). In fact, none of the country dummies attain significance, which suggests that the regional MPs’ projections of the regions’ future in the EU are not significantly mediated by the domestic context. Similarly, the interaction terms are not significant.

Table 7 The Voice of Regions is Somewhat or Very Likely to Receive Greater Weight in the EU's Future. Odds Ratio (OR), Standard Error (SE), and Measures of Fit from Logistic Regression

Variable	M1		M2	
	OR	SE	OR	SE
Influence of the regional level	1.23 [*]	0.082	1.30 [*]	0.150
Cooperation with local/regional actors	1.12	0.075	1.11	0.076
Cooperation with European actors	1.53 ^{***}	0.102	1.55 ^{**}	0.108
Country (ref.: Germany)				
Austria	-	-	1.97	0.807
Spain	-	-	4.61	1.054
Czech Republic	-	-	1.71	1.016
Influence reg. level*country (ref.: Germany)				
Influence reg. level*Austria	-	-	0.98	0.212
Influence reg. level*Spain	-	-	0.75	0.257
Influence reg. level*Czech Republic	-	-	0.92	0.251
Constant	0.10 ^{***}	0.418	0.06 ^{***}	0.638
McFadden's pseudo-R ² value		0.03		0.05
Cox and Snell		0.05		0.06
Nagelkerke (Cragg and Uhler)		0.06		0.08
AIC		1014.3		1014.2
n for all analyses = 764				

Significance levels: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, *p<0.05, + p<0.10.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The ambivalent role of regions and regional parliaments in the EU's multi-level governance system makes them an interesting case for observing the emergence and development of collective agency. Our paper has investigated perceptions of regional MPs about their collective agency from their individual perspective. To this end, we used two central indicators of collective agency. Our first indicator measures the influence regional MPs perceive to have as a regional parliament collectively on political decision-making in the region. The second indicator required regional MPs to evaluate the likelihood that the voice of regions would gain a greater weight in the EU's future. This indicator relates to the projective dimension of collective agency, which is, according to literature, a main driver for the development of (collective) agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Since the notion of agency always includes all temporary dimensions simultaneously, this division is somewhat heuristic, as we have to assume that past experiences as well as current evaluations also contribute to the formation of future agency claims.

In this article we employed a relational perspective, which assumes that relations and networks of regional MPs with their environment are of relevance for the emergence of collective agency. The analysis reveals that the

considered indicators for collective agency are significantly related to the influence the regional MPs attribute to the regional level in its entirety vis-à-vis other levels as well as to the frequency of cooperation with European actors. However, especially in the multivariate setting, there was no particularly strong association observable between “cooperation with local/regional actors” and perceived collective agency. A possible reason could be that it is more common and less contested for regional MPs to cooperate with actors that are close to them. The most important factor for the perceived influence of the regional parliament on political decision-making in the region is the perceived space of action afforded to the regional level in its entirety. Due to the important role of executive actors in the domestic context and at the EU level, perceiving the whole regional level as influential is certain to be conducive to the perceived influence of the regional parliament itself. In relation to the perceived role of the regions in the EU’s future frequent cooperation with European actors emerges as a particularly important factor. Interestingly, reaching out to these distant ties is also of relevance for the influence regional MPs perceive to have as a collective actor on politics in the region. Thus, our empirical analyses underline the important role of networks, where networking with European actors is shown to contribute to projections for a greater voice for regions in the EU’s future as well as to the perceived influence of regional parliaments in the domestic context. These networking activities can be categorized as implicit acts of self-agentification (Hofferberth and Lambach 2023, in this special issue). This networking is at least to some extent performed in the role as regional MP and as a member of the respective regional parliament. Our results, thus, point towards the interdependence between cooperating with more distant ties and collective agency, as these distant ties can open the door to new resources (Granovetter 1973). In sum, our analysis underlines the importance of outreach when engaging in networking activities: especially contacts to distant others push self-esteem of collective actors in terms of recognition from outside, which enhances collective agency in turn. In future research endeavors, it would be interesting to assess if this observation holds also for other collective actors.

Before now, research has mainly focused on formal channels for regional parliaments to engage in the EU’s multi-level system (Borońska-Hryniewiecka 2017a, 2017b; Bursens and Högenauer 2017; Tatham 2014, 2015). Regional parliaments have been granted with slightly more influence in the EU in the past decades, but their struggle for recognition is still ongoing. Since formal channels are limited and/or regional parliaments have to go via the national level, our analysis contributes to the current state of research by providing explorative evidence in relation to the role of informal channels like networking activities for regional MPs perception of collective agency. Nonetheless, our analysis faces some limitations due to its approach of surveying individual MPs. Politicians can be described as a hard-to-reach

population in general due to their limited time resources. Although we followed the same steps for fieldwork in all countries, sample sizes vary, and we have to assume that comparatively more pro-European MPs were likely to participate in our survey. Nevertheless, comparing our own response rates to similar studies in the field, the multistage recruitment procedure allowed us to reach a high number of willing respondents. Further studies should consider using qualitative methods to compare contrasting cases with each other; this would enable studies to gather more in-depth information about the content and nature of the networking activities of individual MPs. In particular, it would be possible to investigate whether these contacts are made principally to serve the individual goals of single MPs or aim at more collective goals for the regional parliament itself. These types of goals (individual/collective) do not necessarily exclude each other, but it would be of interest to know whether all MPs follow the same agreed-upon strategy when it comes to representing the collective actor (i.e., their respective regional parliaments). Although we are currently lacking this kind of information, we deem the surveyed perceptions to be instructive since they inform us about perceived collective agency, which is clearly more powerful than the sum of the individual agencies of single MPs.

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