Article

Can Transnational Cooperation Support Municipalities to Address Challenges of Youth Migration?

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Abstract
In the cooperation project 'YOUMIG,' funded by the INTERREG Danube transnational programme, challenges of youth migration were discussed in a transnational consortium consisting of project partners from different countries from Central and Eastern Europe experiencing difficulties such as a declining population and outmigration, as well as immigration of young people, which necessitated the provision of an integration infrastructure. Project outcomes included strategies as well as pilot activities performed by local-level authorities. The following article will consider outcomes as well as experiences from stakeholders involved in the project and investigate individual and organizational learning processes throughout the project. It will elaborate on the question of the extent to which transnational cooperation can potentially facilitate sustainable institutional changes and transformation. The results confirm the potential of transnational cooperation towards triggering learning and institutional change. Nevertheless, they underline that in the context of the project, the learning processes that could be achieved were predominantly of an individual nature and that the tangible outcomes could not lead to sustainable institutional changes.

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1. Introduction

Between 2017 and 2019, the transnational cooperation project 'YOUMIG' was funded by the INTERREG programme. In the project, challenges of youth migration were discussed in a transnational consortium, consisting of project partners from different Central and Eastern European countries who were experiencing challenges such as declining populations and outmigration, as well as immigration, and therefore feeling the necessity to provide an infrastructure for integration. Migration in the Danube Region, including East-West EU-internal migration as well as migration between EU-member states and candidate countries were in the focus of the project, representing a form of migration that has significantly emerged in the last years. For many countries represented in the consortium, the free movement of labour has led to intensified outmigration of young people in the previous decades and as such has become a major concern for society and politics. The project partners developed local-level actions and visions to react to challenges arising from migration, e.g., by providing better services for young migrants. Exchanging ideas on a transnational basis should lead to improved capacity building of institutions dealing with the topic of migration.

The consortium consisted of 19 partners from eight countries and of different types such as (a) municipal partners from cities and towns in the Danube Region, (b) partners from statistical offices, and (c) partners from scientific institutions (universities) as well as regional development institutions (see list of partners in Table 1). Partners were selected with a view to 1) amplifying the knowledge on youth migration in general, 2) making youth migration more evidence-based within the countries of the Danube Region, and 3) developing potential strategies for local stakeholders to deal with challenges arising from intensified EU-internal migration. Partners from countries both with a positive and a negative migration balance were represented in the consortium. The project activities were generally focussed on supporting municipal stakeholders in addressing challenges of migration, therefore also focussing on the question of the extent to which transnational cooperation can support local stakeholders' governance of population decline and integration measures. The following article will focus on this latter question and critically examine transnational learning activities and their potential of leading towards sustainable institutional transformations on the local level.

It wants to do so by drawing on results from an evaluation conducted at the end of the project. The evaluation was carried out as an online survey, addressing all partners involved in the project. From a total of around 70 consortium members, 35 have answered the survey. Considering the number of collaborators with administrative and financial responsibilities within the project, this return can be rated as satisfying. The evaluation tried to shed light on individual and collective learning processes throughout the project. One main concern of the evaluation was determining how the different local partners could learn about the different viewpoints represented in the consortium and in the given time frame provided by the project. The survey consisted of closed and open questions. The results from open questions, but also the author's experiences and observations made throughout the project, enriched the analysis. Further, one year after the project has ended, project partners were contacted for an ex-post evaluation. Partners from the local level were asked about individual and organizational learning experiences gained during the project. Furthermore, information was gathered on the extent to which the project has brought about sustainable changes on the local level as well as on the extent to which results and outcomes were still activated and in use and thus have facilitated institutional transformation. The article will reflect on the ways in which transnational cooperation can contribute to learning about youth migration and mobility, particularly for towns and cities that display different migration profiles, including emigration. It will further scrutinise how project outcomes and learning experiences may lead to sustainable institutional changes, so that challenges of youth migration may be addressed more effectively on the local level.

2. Youth Migration Challenges in the 'Danube Region'

2.1. Status Quo: Migration in the 'Danube Region'

The so-called 'Danube Region' can be considered as a functional migratory region, consisting of sending and receiving countries of EU-internal migration, as well as candidate and third countries, displaying historic migration ties (Nemeth & Gruber, 2019). According to the 'European Strategy for the Danube Region' (European Commission, 2020a), the region comprises 14 countries: nine EU-member states (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia), two candidate countries (Montenegro and Serbia), and three third countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Ukraine). It represents one of the European 'macro-regions,' consisting of countries and regions facing similar challenges within the European territory and the need to develop a comprehensive spatial strategy (European Commission, 2017). The INTERREG DTP-programme 'Danube' is dedicated to common challenges within this region, with demographic and societal challenges being two of them (European Commission, 2020a).

Migration and especially migration of young people has intensified in the Danube Region in the last decade (Nemeth & Gruber, 2019), as did intra-EU mobility in general, and particularly East–West migration within the Union (Baláz & Karasová, 2017). The intensified migration and mobility has emerged mainly due to historical and political transformation, i.e., the collapse of socialist regimes between 1989 and 1990 and the enlargements of the EU. The internal market and the freedom to move represent a main prerequisite for intensified migration within the enlarged EU territory (King, 2018). Structural changes of EU policy and EU enlargements further transformed conditions for individuals from non-member states migrating to the EU and respectively to states that became EU members (Verwiebe, Wiesböck, & Teitzer, 2014). From a neo-classical and macro perspective, the disparities between Eastern and Western countries in the region, concerning their wealth and economic possibilities, offer a motivation for labour migration. But there are other theoretical viewpoints offering valid explanations, specifically when taking the intensified motivation of young people towards mobility within the European territory into focus. As King (2018) puts it, the fall of the Iron Curtain has created a 'new space for opportunities' and being mobile—or having the possibility to be mobile—a new norm in the context of their transition to adulthood. Next to opportunities in the context of labour and education, lifestyle factors are important drivers for young people's mobility (see e.g., Recchi & Favell, 2009). Causes and types of intra-European migration and migration to Europe are often the results of complex decision-making and can be explained by economic, social, familial, and cultural factors, with usually more than one reason being of importance (Verwiebe

et al., 2014). Generally, migration is a highly selective phenomenon, especially in the context of age, as important life-course events that may trigger mobility usually take place at younger ages (see Kley & Mulder, 2010).

The project YOUMIG took the age group of 15–35-year-olds into focus, representing an age group were most life-course events and transitions usually take place, which eventually also may trigger mobility (e.g., transition to higher education and from education to work, family foundation, etc.; see King, Lulle, Morosanu, & Williams, 2016). Within the project YOUMIG, eight countries of the Danube Region were represented in the consortium: Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia—seven of them with a local partner. For all local partners, a *Local Status Quo Analysis* was conducted at the beginning of the project, to learn about dynamics and types of migration and mobility (YOUMIG, 2018). The analysis included quantitative data analyses of migration and demographic data on the national and local level, a qualitative analysis with local stakeholders to interpret existing patterns and trends, as well as an investigation of types of migration and migration challenges.

We have found various and diverse migration profiles within the Danube Region and within the consortium of the project presented here (see Nemeth & Gruber, 2019, for a detailed overview). While some countries and regions are showing population growth and a positive net inflow of international migration and EU migration, a negative net migration is observed for the majority of these countries. In most countries represented in the project, the Danube Region includes the most important receiving or sending regions. In Austria, one of the main receiving countries of the Danube Region, migration from new European member states has increased, notably since 2007. The Danube Region today represents the most important sending region for immigration to Austria (see Fassmann, Gruber, & Nemeth, 2018).

The *Local Status Quo Analyses* (see YOUMIG, 2018) revealed that labour migration represents a main element of migration within the Danube Region, consisting of different types, with target earners and career seekers being of prime importance (see King et al., 2016, for detailed typologies on labour migration). Very often, stakeholders have reported that migrants take up jobs that are below their qualification, which is considered a main migration challenge within the Danube Region (see Agyas & Sarcsevity, 2017; Alexandrov, 2017; Bleha et al., 2017; Rath, Gruber, Nemeth, & Pschaid, 2017). Further, intensified student migration plays a key role in increasing the mobility of the young population, although very often studying and working in a different country go hand in hand (Rath et al. 2017). Personal networks and family ties are markedly important factors for continued migration within the Danube Region (Agyas & Sarcsevity, 2017; Rath et al., 2017). Transnational families have therefore been named as an important topic within the region. Interviews with local stakeholders and young migrants revealed that quality of life and future opportunities for the next generation also play an important role in the decision to migrate (Gruber & Nemeth, in press). Many moves observed during the project can be categorised as types of circular migration (e.g., seasonal labour migration, daily/weekly commutes), emphasising their importance within the Danube Region (Aralica et al., 2017).

2.2. Migration Challenges on the Local Level and the Potential of EU Cohesion Policy to Address Them

Intra-EU mobility has been promoted by the European Commission as a strategy to create more and better jobs

Table 1. Partner institutions represented in the consortium (excluding associated partners).

Partner type	Partners	Country
Statistical offices	Hungarian Central Statistical Office (*Lead Partner*)	Hungary
	National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria	Bulgaria
	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia	Serbia
Local partners (towns and cities)	Municipality of Sfantu Gheorghe	Romania
	Burgas Municipality	Bulgaria
	Municipality of the City district of Bratislava—Rača	Slovakia
	Municipality of Szeged	Hungary
	City of Graz	Austria
	Municipality of Kanjiza	Serbia
	Maribor Development Agency	Slovenia
Research institutions	Institute for Economic Research	Slovenia
	Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities	Romania
	INFOSTAT—Institute of Informatics and Statistics	Slovakia
	University of Vienna	Austria
	Institute for East and Southeast European Studies	Germany
	Institute of Social Sciences	Serbia

(Scholten & Van Ostaijen, 2018), since a more mobile population is widely perceived as a more resilient one. Higher degrees of mobility imply faster adjustment to economic shocks (Caldera Sanchéz & Andrews, 2011) and (especially internal) migration is seen as one prime mechanism to match labour demand and supply at local and regional scales (Stillwell, Bell, & Shuttleworth, 2018, p. 59). For many countries and regions in the EU labour market, mobility also represents a challenge (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion, 2019). Sending regions experience intra-EU mobility as a threat, notably in countries from Central and Eastern Europe, where it mainly signifies outmigration of the young and educated, which—paired with persistently low fertility rates—results in an unprecedented population decline and ageing (Lutz et al., 2019). Although receiving countries of EU-internal labour migration might experience the inflow of young people as a positive opportunity, we know that it also represents an increased demand for integration measures and a certain challenge for welfare systems (Scholten & Van Ostaijen, 2018), which is on the other hand perceived by politics and societies as a challenge.

The *Local Status Quo Analyses* collected perceived challenges and implications of youth migration from local stakeholders in the case study regions of the project. The outflow of young and educated population is conspicuously perceived as a major challenge by these local stakeholders. In the first place, it has demographic implications. From a national perspective, projections support this perception, showing that in Eastern European member states, intra-EU mobility will have the biggest impact on population change in the future (Lutz et al., 2019). For some countries (e.g., Romania and Bulgaria), a decline of population, due to low fertility and a negative migration balance, is forecasted (Eurostat, n.d.). In all partner countries of the YOUMIG project, fertility rates are below the level of natural replacement, leading to population ageing with outmigration intensifying this trend (see Nemeth & Gruber, 2019). Secondly, migration challenges can lead to individual and societal challenges for outmigration locations as they perceive a decrease in population as a loss of human capital, which is linked to the decrease of social and intellectual capital and knowledge (see Kapur & McHale, 2005). Although return migrants were reported as an important factor in some analyses (e.g., Alexandrov, 2017), academic literature reports how return migrants can fail to reintegrate into their former home society or the labour market, which often hinders the process of applying experiences and knowledge that was gained previously (Cerase, 1974; Lang & Nadler, 2014). Furthermore, the number of migrants that eventually return or intend to return often represents only a share of those who had left (Snel, Faber, & Engbersen, 2015), although the 'liquid' type of migration makes return more feasible for EU-internal mobility (Martin & Radu, 2012). In general, return is attractive when it has occupational or income

advantages, which remains a challenge in the context of the Danube Region, although economic, social, and political developments and increasing economic return have been observed for some Eastern European countries (Papademetriou & Terrazas, 2009). Beside return migration, diaspora engagement and (social) remittances have been acknowledged in academic literature as potential benefits for sending regions (Collyer, 2013; Levitt, 1998). Countries of the Danube Region have thus far mainly focussed on the facilitation of cultural and political identity through diaspora networks or have only recently started comprehensive diaspora policies (see e.g., Herner-Kovács, 2014).

Intra-EU migration is an important and widely promoted element of the European internal market. Challenges that arise from it have been addressed by EU cohesion policy. As lagging and peripheral regions generally tend rather to experience outmigration, EU cohesion policy focusses on the investment in lagging regions to make them more competitive. Place-sensitive policies are promoted particularly to support local strength and endogenous potential (European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion, 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2017). Further, cohesion policy focusses on an improvement in dealing with challenges, by improving institutional capacities to create easier mobility in order to pursue social, economic, and territorial cohesion. There have been several EU-funded projects dedicated to migration challenges, concluding with calls for better governance of migration, e.g., in the form of improved information and guidance for newcomers, also when targeting internal movers and intra-EU mobiles (see e.g., Reeger, 2018). Several EU-funded projects focussed specifically on youth migration, also in the context of INTERREG (see KEEP, 2020). The YOUMIG project therefore represents one example of a project that was designed to address challenges and implications to support municipalities in the development of strategies towards the improved handling of either population loss and outmigration or of immigration (and sometimes of both, which can represent challenges occurring simultaneously), putting emphasis on transnational and institutional capacity building and cooperation.

3. Improving Institutional Capacities and Triggering Institutional Change through Transnational Learning in the Context of INTERREG

The INTERREG programme for European territorial cooperation is part of the EU Regional Policy and provides funding for the cooperation of different partners (governmental stakeholders and administration, stakeholders from economy, society, or NGOs as well as scientific partners), mainly in the context of regional and spatial development. It is dedicated to supporting cities and regions in Europe towards an improved handling of the challenges they are currently facing (Hachmann, 2011). Results of

INTERREG projects include the development of strategies, guidelines, handbooks, pilot actions, and training units, but also investment in smaller infrastructures and facilities (see e.g., Bundesministerium für Verkehr und Digitale Infrastruktur, 2017). Projects are financed by the Structural Fund of the EU and are usually funded for three years.

The cooperation can be either between border regions (cross-border), between regions (regional cooperation), or of transnational character. Transnational projects take up challenges that are specific to certain cooperation areas, focussing on spatial development in larger cooperation areas (Hachmann, 2011). The idea of transnational cooperation is that in some areas, challenges are spilling over administrative borders and therefore larger territories need to be addressed. Yet, the identification of themes with true transnational character is challenging (Dühr & Nadin, 2007) and transnational problem-solving remains contested. The transnational cooperation programme focusses on the so-called 'macro-regions' (with the Danube Region being one of them), "where there is a need to increase economic and social integration and cohesion" (Faludi, 2008, p. 6). Projects should contribute to the implementation of common European targets and objectives (such as the Europe 2020 strategy or the Territorial Agenda).

The INTERREG Danube programme gave priority to four policy fields during the period 2014–2020 (European Commission, 2017). Priority 4 focussed on the 'well-governed Danube Region' intending to improve the capabilities and capacities of public institutions and key actors with the strategic vision to influence national/regional/local policies "through the development and practical implementation of policy frameworks, tools and services and concrete pilot investments" (European Commission, 2017, p. 4). Transnational cooperation is seen as an intervention that can support the improvement of governance, e.g., via the exchange of good practices (European Commission, 2017). Transnational cooperation can therefore be conceptualised as an element that can trigger institutional change, based on organizational learning.

3.1. Conceptualizing Organizational Learning through Transnational Cooperation

Several studies have investigated how organizational learning occurs in the context of transnational cooperation projects (Böhme, Josserand, Ingi Haraldsson, Bachtler, & Polverari, 2003; Colomb, 2007; Laähteenmaäki-Smith & Dubois, 2006; Harfst & Osebik, 2015; Vinke-de Kruijf & Pahl-Wostl, 2016). In these studies, it was widely acknowledged that learning in cooperation projects is based on social or collaborative learning, which "occurs when social interactions and processes change the understanding of the individuals involved" (Vinke-de Kruijf & Pahl-Wostl, 2016, p. 243). Social learning thereby is usually differentiated in individual learn-

ing and organizational learning, with individual learning widely considered the starting point for organizational learning (Hachmann, 2008; Vinke-de Kruijf & Pahl-Wostl, 2016). When learning can be transferred from the 'micro-' to the 'meso-level,' it can be implemented by organizations and furthermore does not get wasted once an individual leaves an organization (Vinke-de Kruijf & Pahl-Wostl, 2016). Learning is said to be based on a transfer of knowledge, which includes different forms: the transfer of explicit knowledge, which is mainly comprised of formalised information and knowledge, as well as tacit knowledge, which includes knowledge of a more personal nature and is more difficult to codify (Geppert & Clark, 2003). Group learning is influenced by the characteristics of the participants (their ability and motivation to participate and to learn), the composition of the partnership (including the knowledge of the single partners as well as mutual trust), and the interaction processes (in quality and quantity) within the project (Vinke-de Kruijf & Pahl-Wostl, 2016). Transnational learning has been investigated recently in the context of city-to-city learning, specifically in the context of city-to-city learning on climate change (Bellinson & Chu, 2019; Haupt, Chelleri, van Herk, & Zevenbergen, 2020). In a recent article investigating transnational climate city networks, Haupt et al. (2020) find that there are great limitations to transnational learning, especially when learning from best practices and front-runner cities. The authors argue for a distinction between the mere sharing of knowledge and the in-depth process of learning.

This distinction might explain why not all INTERREG projects succeed in triggering organizational learning processes (Hachmann, 2008) or sustainable institutional changes. Although "INTERREG offers a 'structure of opportunity' for the communication, dissemination and transformation of different concepts, cultures and ideas…[c]hanges in policies and practices resulting from the cooperation and learning processes may or may not subsequently happen" (Colomb, 2007, p. 365). Mostly it is only individual learning achievements that are reached (Colomb, 2007; Vinke-de Kruijf & Pahl-Wostl, 2016). Learning is not always the main motivation of participants, but sometimes it is merely the increased access to EU financial resources, which of course can hinder a learning process (Colomb, 2007). Geppert and Clark (2003) point out that knowledge transfer across borders needs translation to the destination context and that learning processes might be contested with an opposition towards ideas that travel over borders. This can particularly be the case when learning processes are understood as 'catching up' processes, showing no sensitivity to local and national contexts. Cultural as well as language barriers are sometimes described as limiting factors (Harfst & Osebik, 2015), although problems in cooperation are not always primarily related to language (Laähteenmaäki-Smith & Dubois, 2006). Learning can also be made more complicated when stakeholders are embedded in different administrative or legal systems

(Böhme et al., 2003). Further, projects are awarded a distinct set of financial and time resources, which is often seen as a limitation to the means of properly fulfilling all learning objectives (Harfst & Osebik, 2015). Some authors even mention financial value as the main interest of institutions in being part of an INTERREG project (Shepherd & Ioannides, 2020). It also has to be mentioned that for many actors involved, the cooperation in transnational projects represents only a minor aspect of their daily work and therefore they display limited commitment potential (Hachmann, 2008). There are well-recognised examples of INTERREG projects that were able to implement organizational learning effects (see e.g., European Commission, 2020b). As projects usually are preceded by a period of extensive planning and proposal preparation, they generally have a good basis for developing a common problem statement and objectives for the transnational cooperation process, as well as for identifying potential learning experiences. The European Commission promotes close cooperation with key stakeholders and the development of project ideas with close thematic ties to existing EU strategies to guarantee the successful implementation of project results (European Commission, 2017).

3.2. The Evaluation of Learning Processes and the Sustainability of Project Outcomes

In past studies, it has been criticised that INTERREG programmes are mainly evaluated according to quantitative measures relying on indicator-based and quantitative methods, with the main focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of the programme (Hachmann, 2011), wheras less-tangible outcomes remain widely neglected (Colomb, 2007; Hachmann, 2011). Authors have noted that there are often no ex-post evaluations of INTERREG projects, which impairs the potential of learning from past projects (Colomb, 2007). Further, a more qualitative form of evaluation and in-depth investigation of the individual as well as organizational learning process has been called for, to gain better insight into possible future knowledge development and for capitalization on transnational cooperation projects (Colomb, 2007).

The INTERREG Danube programme likewise mainly uses quantitative measures to evaluate successful project implementation. The project partners report on the development of the project in the 'progress report.' Partners report back on how progress is achieved in the development of single deliverables and report potential difficulties and deviations or delays in the implementation. Evaluation throughout the project is mainly focussed on financial management. The outreach of the project is measured by a quantification of the target groups that were reached. Yet, learning experiences gained throughout the projects are also collected in the final reports, as shared by the respective partners and collected by the lead partners. This however happens only by the time that the end of the project is reached. Although 'documented learning interactions' were highlighted as a main element of the projects (see INTERREG Danube, 2016), having the goal to acquire institutional knowledge in the transnational context, an in-depth evaluation of these learning interactions that were defined and conducted by the partners (see Soltész, 2019) has not been performed. Of course, the sheer number of these documented learning interactions, denominated in a very large number of projects, complicates such an evaluation. An evaluation particularly emphasizing the transnational element of different forms of learning would nevertheless be an important element to anticipate the success of the programme. The INTERREG Danube programme clearly emphasised a result-oriented approach as well as the delivery of concrete and measurable outputs and results (see INTERREG Danube, 2016). Although intangible tasks have also been mentioned as valid outputs (see INTERREG Danube, 2016, part 6, p. 13), clear priority is given to tangible outcomes and their communication. Calls for a more qualitative and in-depth evaluation therefore seem not to have been followed thus far, whereas the communication of ideas and results was emphasised to capitalise on and establish outcomes of the projects and to increase interaction with the public (Bundesministerium für Verkehr und Digitale Infrastruktur, 2017).

Measuring the 'success' of a project is difficult, notably in the context of migration and mobility, as the challenge of youth migration, for example, is a very complex topic. Likewise, focussing on sending or receiving regions has different implications for the outcome of a project. Migration furthermore is a policy field influenced by many factors such as economy and politics, therefore representing many different viewpoints of different stakeholders. The multiplicity of actors and perspectives however underlines the necessity for more (transnational) cooperation. The cooperation of different stakeholders (scientific and governmental partners as well as partners with different perspectives on the respective challenges) has been hypothesized as a major opportunity towards individual and organizational learning in the context of the YOUMIG project, to improve our understanding of the motivations as well as of the potentials of migration. The learning outcomes were considered a prerequisite for addressing the implications arising from youth migration. We will now consider the extent to which organizational learning and sustainable institutional changes could be observed in the YOUMIG project.

4. Transnational Learning and Institutional Changes in the YOUMIG Project

The INTERREG Danube transnational project YOUMIG aimed at strengthening stakeholders on the local level to deal with migration and mobility challenges more effectively. In most municipalities that were part of the consortium, outmigration was considered the main

challenge leading to population loss. The cooperation of researchers and local policy makers pursued a better understanding of the drivers and possible outcomes of youth migration. Further, pilot actions and local strategies were compiled as direct results of the project. In the following, the outcomes of the project will be reflected on in two ways: On the one hand, the survey results as well as reflections from the author will elaborate on individual learning processes concerning migration and mobility in the context of a transnational project; on the other hand, the outcomes of the project on the municipal level will be reflected on according to their sustainability and their potential to lead to institutional change.

4.1. Perceived Learning about Youth Migration from Transnational Cooperation

In the context of the YOUMIG project, different stakeholders participated in the consortium (see table 1). This complicated the collaboration on the one hand, as different standpoints had to be considered. On the other hand, a multifaceted approach was possible due to this research design. All survey participants stated that they have found the transnational cooperation useful in this respect: 61% have found it very useful, 22% useful, and 16% a little useful (no answers for 'not useful at all'). The survey participants conspicuously rated the benefits for municipal partners enrolled in the transnational cooperation as high (35%) or very high (45%) while the benefit for statistical offices and research institutions was rated a little lower.

Theoretical as well as practical knowledge was collected in the context of different work packages, where learning about youth migration was the main aim. Apart from a *Theoretical Framework on Youth Migration* (collecting theoretical and empirical knowledge from literature and completed studies; see Fassmann et al., 2018),

the development of *Local Status Quo Analyses* for each of the local partners (see YOUMIG, 2018), as well as a *Collection of Best Practices* with projects that mitigate youth migration challenges and participation in two *Study Visits* (to partners within and outside the project; see YOUMIG, 2018 [Output 6.3., Transnational cooperation learning schemes]) were the main factors contributing to learning about youth migration challenges and how to address them. Figure 1 presents the results of the evaluation of these elements. Partners indicated the degree to which they found them helpful for learning about youth migration. Theoretical knowledge delivered by research partners was considered helpful for learning about youth migration, but learning about the own situation in the context of the *Local Status Quo Analysis* and personal exchanges in the context of *Study Visits* were rated even higher. The results underline that learning greatly relies on personal relations. Further, the high rating of learning perceived in the *Local Status Quo Analyses* and the *Study Visits* highlight the favouring of the aspiration of knowledge that is meaningful to the individual or the organization (Haupt et al., 2020).

In the open answer categories, it was mentioned that cooperation within the project has been useful for the local partners, as they were able to discover that similar challenges also existed for other municipalities. It also helped them to benchmark the own situation and widen own horizons. Exchanging ideas furthermore helped them to see potential development paths and to learn from (best) practices and role models. The general idea of the project—which was that not only municipalities with similar migration profiles could learn from each other—was widely rated positively by the project partners. Bringing together stakeholders with different perspectives on the topic of migration and actors from locations with different challenges provided a possibility towards mutual learning. The vast majority of sur-
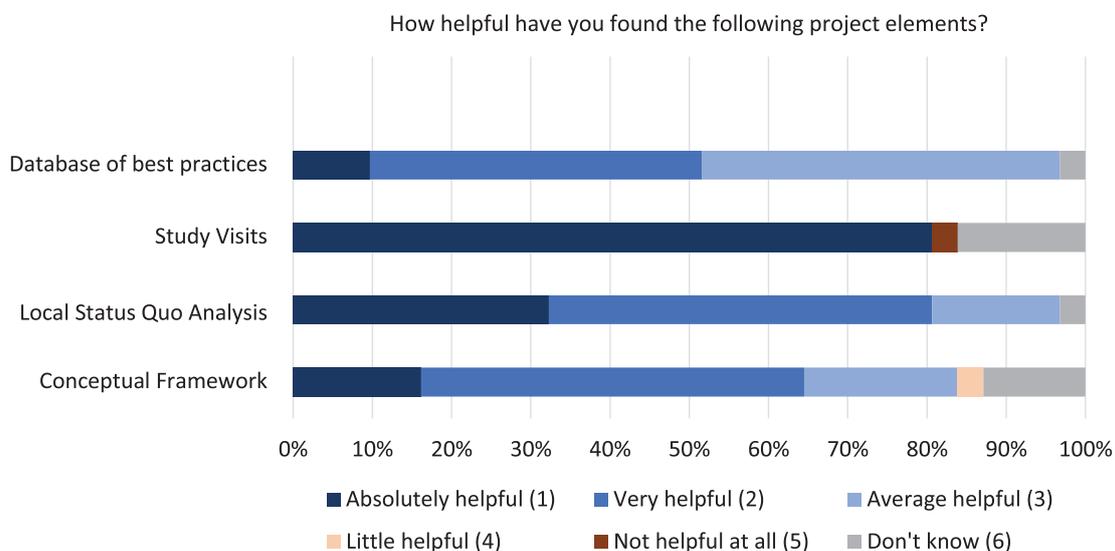

How helpful have you found the following project elements?

Figure 1. Results from the evaluation survey on perceived learning elements, evaluated by the project participants.

vey respondents saw potential in future cooperation in a similar consortium (75%). Yet, 20% stated that a future consortium would be more beneficial with a consortium consisting of different countries and partners. These respondents explained that a more problem-focussed perspective on similar challenges would make more sense to them. Some partners evaluated that bringing together highly divergent perspectives and views made the project idea very fuzzy and therefore some consortium members would have wished for a more focussed work on a more clear and specific topic (e.g., local problems arising from 'population loss,' 'brain drain,' etc.). In general, 90% of all survey participants stated that they have learned about new aspects of migration during the project. 35% stated that their perspective on migration has changed to some extent (41% 'not too much' and 22% 'not at all'). This underlines the necessity of differentiating between learning and the acquisition of knowledge (Haupt et al., 2020).

4.2. Insights on Learning about Youth Migration from the Open Answer Categories and General Reflections

As gained from the open answer categories in the survey, the exchange of perspectives still made it possible for members of the consortium to learn about new aspects of migration. Many general views on migration and mobility could be discussed and reflected upon by discussing the types, forms, and implications of youth migration based on knowledge from scientific literature as well as empirical analyses conducted in the project. Survey participants stated that they have found it useful to gain new knowledge on different types of migration. Some survey participants mentioned that it was particularly helpful to learn about different aspects of return migration from a theoretical point of view, e.g., by taking a differentiated look at types of return migration and hindering factors for successful return. Learning about 'transnational lifestyles' and the potential of 'social remittances' and 'diaspora' have also been mentioned as aspects of interest.

In the evaluation survey it was mentioned that it was a new learning experience for some consortium partners to consider immigration and its potential more closely, instead of merely understanding migration as outmigration in the form of 'brain drain' and seeing immigration as a burden. Especially young people within Europe make use of their mobility choices, and therefore strategies have been developed by the partners to address the implications of European youth mobility. Specific ideas for addressing challenges of youth migration were applied in the context of *Pilot Actions* (see YOUMIG, 2018). These activities included 1) supporting the integration of newcomers, also in emigration locations, 2) supporting return migrants, 3) staying in contact with migrants that have left their region of origin, and 4) addressing the local population and quality of life in the municipalities. Integration policies, in particular, still

have to be developed in many cities and municipalities of the Danube Region (see Soltész, 2019).

While different ideas towards supporting and better (re-)integrating return migrants (e.g., supporting entrepreneurship, information platforms, etc.) were implemented in the context of the project, the importance of understanding the newcomer population as a resource was recognised, also in sending regions. Although the loss of the young population was the main challenge in most municipalities and cities participating in the project, some of the participating cities and towns also experienced immigration to a certain extent. This type of immigration has thus far not been perceived as holding positive potential in all locations, and by exchanging thoughts with representatives from immigration locations on the importance of the immigration of newcomers it did become obvious that immigration is of great importance when being confronted with outmigration of the local youth and with brain drain. It became clear throughout the project that receiving regions also experience outmigration of young and educated population to other destinations and that immigration and integration is a form of substitution of local population loss (see also Soltész, 2019). For this learning element, the transnational perspective might have been decisive as partners could experience the interconnectedness of migration within the Danube Region: While the leaving of young people is experienced as outmigration in one region, it means immigration in another. Further, a scientific approach to the practical challenges of the municipalities was used to reflect on existing local ideas and hopes, and to develop strategies. The project represented a type of applied research, where existing theoretical and empirical knowledge was communicated to society and governance, in order to include this information into future policy-making. The transnational and applied perspective can lead to transformations and the reinterpretation of existing views and perspectives.

In the project consortium, some stakeholders experienced difficulties in the implementation process of local strategies to address challenges arising from migration. On the one hand, a lack of political will and a counteracting political position on the national level generally played an important role in some countries participating in the project. As the project was started during times where Europe was confronted with challenges arising from third-country migration and intensified asylum migration to Europe, a general rejection of the topic of migration spilled over to the project idea. Although the circumstances underlined the need to talk about different forms and types of migration, some (political) stakeholders in the Danube Region became reluctant to participate in project activities. In the evaluation, one participant mentioned that the 'political sphere' rejected the creation of evidence-based migration policies, whereas others saw a lack of political will, mainly on the national level, to deal with the complex issue of migration. Nevertheless, the project gave momentum to

considering immigration as potential, which gave impetus to a different perspective on the common national narrative in many countries. For other municipal partners, the organizational structure and the general lack of autonomy of the local governance structure were mentioned as challenges encountered when attempting to implement effective strategies on the local level.

4.3. Sustainability of Project Outcomes and Institutional Change

The main goal of the YOUMIG project was to create strategies on the local level to address challenges of labour migration experienced by cities and towns in the Danube Region. The strategies were supported with ideas gathered in the context of the project from the research partners (theoretical and practical ideas, e.g., on best practices). As already mentioned, all municipalities involved have created *Pilot Actions* that tried to take specific local needs into consideration. Local *Pilot Actions* included regional marketing campaigns for attracting returnees and newcomers, co-working spaces to offer infrastructure for entrepreneurs, as well as information points for entrepreneurs. The ideas were partly inspired by activities of other municipalities in Europe, as introduced in the context of the collection of best practices. Furthermore, the creation of a *One-stop-shop* as an information point for young migrants was implemented in the context of the project.

While the project results and outputs were ambitious on account of their manifoldness, some partners already were cautious in rating their sustainability at the end of the project, as seen in Figure 2. Project partners mentioned in the open answer categories that limited resources (time and funding) will represent challenges to continue achievements reached during the project. Furthermore, it was mentioned that changing staff represented a challenge to the sustainability of project

results. After the end of the project and thus of the funding, it was indeed the case that most *Pilot Actions* and *One-stop shops* came to a halt, as reported by the local partners one year after the project had ended. Even where *Pilot Actions* are still being sustained, it is mostly hardly possible to maintain them properly. The sustainability of project outcomes and the implementation of learning experiences were therefore undermined by the limited project time, as well as by limited financial and personal resources.

5. Conclusions: Transnational Learning for Addressing Challenges of Youth Migration

Returning to the overall question of the article, namely an enquiry into the degree to which transnational programmes such as INTERREG can trigger institutional change and organizational learning processes in the context of migration challenges, the following conclusion elaborates on the experiences gained during the INTERREG project YOUMIG. The project offered a great environment for mutual and transnational learning, with multiple possibilities towards exchanges between consortium partners as well as a variety of knowledge transfers and activities. These also led to multiple individual learning processes, as indicated by the evaluation survey conducted at the end of the project. Not all of these learning instances eventually led to sustainable organizational learning—although a variety of outputs on the local level was realised (e.g., *Pilot Actions*)—nor did they lead to sustainable institutional transformations of migration governance either. Further, some learning experiences might not be perceived as in-depth learning, but rather as knowledge acquisition.

The YOUMIG example showed that it is very difficult to implement sustainable institutional changes on the local level in the context of a short-term project. Particularly in the case of YOUMIG, the ambitious
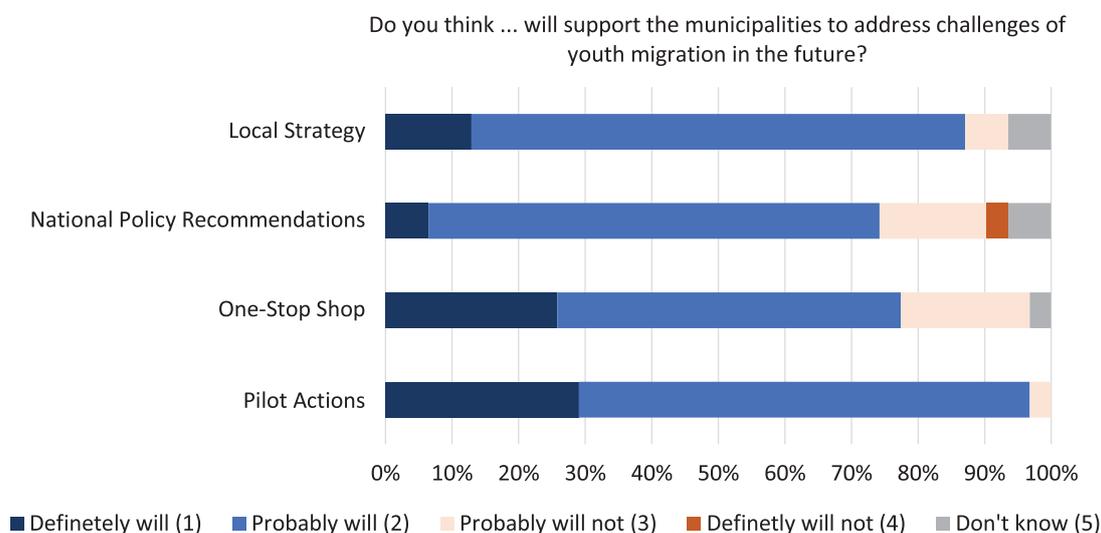

Figure 2. Results from the evaluation survey on the estimation of the sustainability of final project outcomes.

amounts of tangible outputs have to be mentioned, as well as the innovative composition of partners dedicated to challenges of youth migration from different angles, which all represented challenges to organizational learning. While many partners did get an idea of different viewpoints, the dissimilarities might also have led to an inhibited learning process. Furthermore, it must be mentioned that in many countries migration is perceived as a contested policy field, which has been discovered as a hindering factor for improved cooperation and governance. While sustainable institutional changes were unable to be realised within the time frame of the project, it should be mentioned that individual learning did take place for most partners. Although the project results were mainly defined by tangible outcomes and their communication, these necessary individual learning experiences should not be underrated, as they were mentioned in the theoretical literature as the starting point for organizational learning.

It must further be underlined that the lack of sustained institutional change in the context of INTERREG can be attributed in general to the limited time frame given to a very difficult venture, with a project duration of a maximum of 36 months (and in the case of YOUMIG, 30 months). Although multiple learning experiences stimulated by transnational cooperation did take place in the consortium, the process of these learning experiences eventually leading to institutional change would probably need longer than the duration of an INTERREG project. Institutional transformations are based on individual learning processes. Therefore, a lack of flexibility (mainly according to temporality, but also according to changing institutional challenges and needs) is often an important constraint. For the YOUMIG project, it can be summarised that—although the project has created a variety of outputs and results in different locations—the most sustainable results are the individual instances of learning experienced by the partners involved in the project. As local-level institutions are implemented in multi-governance systems, it further must be recognised that actors on the municipal or city level do not always have the power to implement changes, all the more so when they are in opposition to national policy narratives. Municipal partners reported a high level of political dependency in their scope of action, which very often can counter-act individual as well as organizational learning processes. Finally, it has to be considered that project partners have also been following other interests than the implementation of institutional change and organizational learning (e.g., networking, financial interests, etc.).

Should future projects want to realise more sustainable and in-depth learning outcomes, it might be valuable to consider the importance of personal relations as a prerequisite for learning. Further, the temporality of learning and the respective limitations of INTERREG projects might be addressed by focussing on the creation of sustainable networks or through cooperation with existing networks. While many projects seem to display a focus on tangible outcomes, within the short span of time given, it might be more useful and sustainable to focus on smaller outputs such as interventions or short-term pop-up actions that focus on sensibilisation rather than on institutionalisation. Putting the learning and interaction process into the spotlight—instead of the implementation of tools and activities—might be a more valuable approach, especially when discussing complex topics such as youth migration. Addressing delicate topics (such as outmigration, population decline, or immigration) brings together a variety of opinions, viewpoints, and visions, not least in a transnational consortium. Therefore, the exchange of these aspects needs to be emphasised to a greater extent than when, e.g., exchanging technical know-how. It ultimately has to be recognised that topics such as migration are highly influenced by different political narratives, which provides opportunity for intensified exchange and communication. Future evaluation processes should be able to focus on qualitative results. Not only the communication of successful project outputs but also the discussion of difficulties might lead to important learning processes, which later might become an important element of institutional change.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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