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Local Autonomy Meets Spatial Justice: Civil-Action in Urban Kotka

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ABSTRACT

Within the EU's multi-level governance system, there has been an increasing interest in whether and how an enhanced role of the local level in the delivery of cohesion policies could lead to more cohesion, or in other words, to improved spatial justice. Joining this debate, the paper analyses a particular application and adjustment of the "ideal model" of the European policy instrument Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). In its core lies a local, third-sector action from Kotka, a medium-sized city in Southeast Finland showing, in a national comparison, significant levels of unwell-being of groups of residents and neighbourhoods. The paper investigates how local stakeholders organise themselves to address social/spatial injustice and how this is affected by "multidimensional metagovernance". Additionally to a multi-level and relational approach to governance processes, linked to a dynamic understanding of spatial justice as an interactive combination of its distributive and procedural aspects, local autonomy is conceptualised in terms of two sources of empowerment, based on the two principles of power. One is how the "power of initiative" is expressed locally, evoking ideas of place-based capacities and perceptions and participation; the other is how the local level may strive to enhance its "power of immunity", its freedom to act without the control of higher tiers of government. Meanwhile, the complexity and fuzziness of the notion of "locality" is demonstrated as a terrain and subject of spatial injustices as well as the source of (policy) solutions thereof.

Keywords: community-led local development, civil society initiatives**,** multidimensional metagovernance, EU cohesion policy, Finland

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Introduction and enquiry

Cohesion policies aim at spatially balanced and sustainable economic development and improved quality of life across a particular territory (of the EU, a country or a region). They are deemed more effective when their deployment is brought closer to the local level and the citizens. On a general level, this paper investigates this assumption based on research conducted about a complex "initiative", a civil-society based local action in Kotka intriguingly embedded in multi-level cohesion policies. More specifically, present study contributes to the understanding of whether, and especially, how greater autonomy of the "locality" and local actors can result in more effectiveness of cohesion policies in delivering better spatial justice[2].

The "autonomy" of the local level depends both on its powers granted by law as well as on its own (stakeholders') capacities to formulate and pursue a place-based strategy for local development. The initiative studied in Kotka, a medium-sized city in Southeast Finland, giving rise to two consecutive grassroots projects targeting the activation of various vulnerable groups of residents, is local in its focus and "bottom-up" in its main approach. However, due to its reliance on external resources, i.e. EU funds, this grassroots action has been both enabled and controlled "from above" by European, national and regional interests, priorities and structures. Such embeddedness in multi-level structures provides a good ground for studying the implications and dynamic forces of autonomy as well as the meaning and dimensions of the "local". The present paper therefore seeks to understand what factors limit and extend the potential of the studied initiative to increase the autonomy of the local level in terms of its power to deal with social/spatial injustices; what dimensions and definitions of the "local" emerge in the initiative's intervention logic.

Semi-structured expert interviews, focus-group discussions and (participatory and non-participatory) observations provide the bulk of the information that help explore how the studied initiative works on improving various aspects of social/spatial injustice, and to what extent it "empowers" the local level to address those issues.[3] In addition, the study draws on a review of relevant policy documents, documentation of national

2. This paper is partly based on empirical research conducted in the framework of the project "RELOCAL. Resituating the Local in Cohesion and Territorial Development". This latter has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under Grant Agreement no 727097.

3. During the period between December 2017 and November 2018, 25 individual interviews were carried out with stakeholders, mainly face-to-face, and a few via phone and Skype. Recruiting interviewees relied on the results of preliminary mapping (by way of a dedicated initial group interview with key stakeholders) as well as continuous "snowballing". Participant observation was carried out also at several national events and workshops concerning CLLD in the spring and autumn of 2018. To discuss findings and deepen understanding, a final three-hour long focus-group discussion was held in Kotka (20th November 2018) with selected key civil-society actors, Kotka City, and relevant regional and national stakeholders.

and European debates on deploying CLLD, as well as academic literature on autonomy and spatial justice.

Following a brief outline of the main conceptual starting points, the "story" of the initiative implemented via two consecutive projects and Kotka, as its local setting, are presented below. This is done in order to communicate the important facts regarding contexts of spatial justice, the social and institutional "action field" and stakeholders as well as the timeline of relevant concurrent processes. The analysis relates various features of the initiative and its context to the conceptual points of departure, i.e. intricacies of spatial justice and local autonomy in order to formulate responses to the initial enquiries.

Conceptual starting points connecting locality, spatial justice and autonomy

This paper has an essentially not only a multiscale but a multidimensional approach to sociospatial relations (recognising its advantages as proposed in Jessop *et al.*, 2008; Jessop, 2016). On the conceptual level, this perspective helps to achieve the ambition to link the framing of spatial justice dynamics with theories about the sources of power and different types of autonomy of the local level within a multi-level governance setting. Furthermore, the multidimensional approach is justified also on an empirical-analytical level. Territorial rules and multiscale deployment of (e.g. CLLD) funding and the administrative jurisdiction of places (e.g. of Kotka) closely intertwine with the "soft spaces" of various, flexible and negotiated spatial imaginaries (Servillo, 2019; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009) and scale-jumping networks constructed and pursued by different actors (on local and other levels) in the story of the studied initiative.

In order to describe inhibitors and promoters of the studied initiative's ability to strengthen local autonomy in advancing spatial justice, this study employs the approach by Madanipour *et al.* (2017) to the concept of "locality", which is in turn inspired by, for instance, Lefebvre, Harvey and Massey. Localities are "porous and interlinked parts of wider contexts", and the nexus of a range of forces that contribute to spatial (in)justice and democratic legitimacy", and thus are to be analysed "from a critical and open perspective" (Madanipour *et al.*, 2017, p. 77). Many social and economic processes surpass the political territoriality of the funding instruments of distinct spatial-administrative levels with fixed territorial limits of competence. Vertical relationships, besides establishing hierarchies that may be the source of democratic deficit and power imbalances, may also facilitate top-down redistribution of resources in favour of places in "unjust" positions at the regional, local (and "sub-local", e.g.

neighbourhood and community) scales. Various flows and competitive relationships between cities and regions create disparities in socio-economic development. However, horizontal forms of cooperation and coordination have the potential to reduce imbalances generated by these relations as well as vertical hierarchies. They may also complement top-down policies that promote place-based development. In addition, hierarchies and networks are interconnected with transversal relations cutting across and jumping scales. Finally, localities themselves are sites of "multiplicity, variation and diversity" with their own internal patterns and dynamics of spatial justice. Therefore, territory, place, scales and networks are interconnected, and localities are not fixed neither self-contained. Consequently, the assessment of resources, capacities and powers of the locality to pursue its own ends in achieving improved social and spatial justice needs the recognition of all these dimensions.

Furthermore, the local initiative presented in this paper revolves around the relationship between society, space and exclusion that is, interactions expressed by the concept of spatial justice (Lefebvre, 1974, Harvey, 1973/2009 inspired by Rawls, 1971; Soja, 2010), the "ensemble of relations between spatial dynamics and justice" (Morange and Quentin, 2018, p. 2). In light of the multidimensional and multi-actor setting discussed above, it is impossible to ignore the possibility that policy actions are influenced by the different experience and perception of injustices on the various levels and by diverse stakeholders in "cohesion policies" from Europe to the individual. Since the experience and definition of the existence and the patterns of (distributive) spatial injustices motivate and direct the formulation of the actual responses (corrective processes) to those, the relativity and normativity of justice (ibid.) lie certainly at the heart of the interconnectedness of the distributive and procedural aspects of justice.

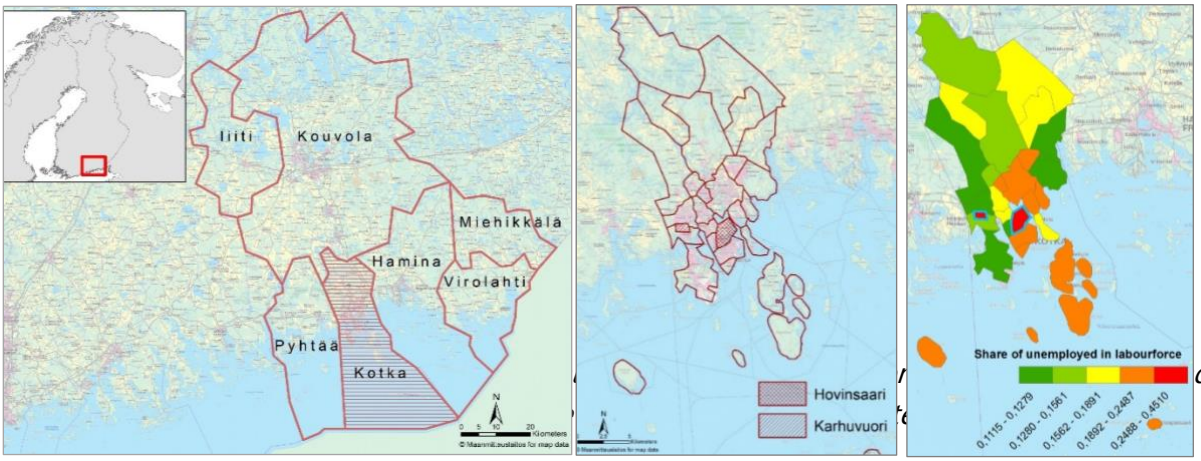
Therefore, in order to better understand the drivers, objectives as well as achievements of the action in focus, the idea of spatial justice is opened up in terms of the connections between the distributive and procedural aspects of justice (based on e.g. Rawls 1971). By this, any prioritisation and contrast between justice understood as "outcome" or "process" can be played down and instead, their interaction be explored offering an insight into processes that affect the powers of the local level. Existing and/or perceived (un)just situations (that are also results of sociospatial relations and processes) mean the actual or perceived existence/lack of resources and opportunities for the improvement of relationships and "processes" that could bring about the "procedural" empowerment and improved "distributive" situation of the locality and its people. An example for the inseparability of the elements in the process-outcome-process chain behind spatial injustice is the phenomenon of spatial or territorial stigmatization (a mild form of which has been experienced in the locality in focus of this paper). That is why the elimination of spatial stigma requires a combination of

thoughtful social policies by the public sector and well-organized community activism (Slater, 2015, p. 25).

Finally, linked to this dynamic approach in understanding spatial justice as an interactive combination of its distributive and procedural aspects, local autonomy is conceptualised in terms of the two principles of power, elaborated first in relation to (a narrower, more constitutional/legal understanding of) local autonomy by Clark (1984), but also evoked in more recent work on the subject (e.g. Pratchett, 2004; Ladner *et al.*, 2016). Two inextricable sets of various (re)distributive and procedural factors in local empowerment are examined in the Kotka case below. One is the ways how the "power of initiative" is expressed and exercised locally. These evoke ideas of place-based knowledge, capacities and perceptions, as well as participation and local partnerships. The other is the ways higher levels grant or limit the locality's "power of immunity" (and how the local level may strive to enhance such power). This regards the degree of freedom to act without (too much) control of higher tiers of government, yet not ignoring the locality's embeddedness in and dependence on, European multi-level governance. It has to be noted that the original conceptual framework is inspired by legal and formal-institutional power structures in which the local (that is, the institution of a local government) exercises a certain level of autonomy. This paper extends the use of the theory in order to match a broader and non-institutional notion of "autonomous action" by local actors, too. This is done to be able to go "below" and "behind" local government and study the initiative of informal, grassroots actors in order to understand whether and how it eventually has the potential to empower the locality as a whole, in its dealing with spatial injustice.

Kotka and its local initiative

Kotka and spatial justice



unemployment in labour force within the city of Kotka (by postal districts) Source of data: Statistics Finland, Paavo database, data from 2014/2015. (Based on Fritsch et al., 2019).

Kotka, a medium-sized city in Southeast Finland (Figure 1), located on the Gulf of Finland (130 km east of the capital Helsinki, in the Kymenlaakso region), has for long suffered from the structural changes in its economic base: traditional forest industry and an international port. Recessions in the early 1990s and since 2008 have amplified the adverse effects of restructuring in the local economy and led to increased, especially long-term and youth unemployment. Although Kotka is not exceptional in Finland with such problems (which are particularly common in the eastern and south-eastern regions of the country), in a national comparison, certain groups of its residents and some of its neighbourhoods are exposed to significant levels of unwell-being (i.e. conditions opposite of broad understanding of social- and health-wise well-being.) Higher (than national) levels of morbidity, substance abuse, mental health problems have been recorded, which in turn have negative impacts on the overall atmosphere, self-esteem and external perception of the place. The emergence of a negative spatial stigma is observable in Karhuvuori, posing a risk of socio-economic disadvantage being reproduced; it is generally understood that its removal requires integrated efforts (external and internal, and by different sectors). On the one hand, objectively, one could note that in a European, and especially global, comparison, even the most "deprived" parts of Kotka or most vulnerable groups of its residents have a relatively secure and high quality of life and environment. On the other hand, one needs to remember that disadvantagedness is a normative experience and is the object as well as result of, self- and external perceptions. Injustice does exist and calls for treatment.

Kotka's autonomy as a municipality and its role in promoting spatial justice

In terms of administration, Kotka is a municipality within the Finnish unitary system of government. A well-established and well-functioning system of municipal governments works in this country already in a relatively open, inclusionary and participatory fashion, generally allowing for hybrid institutions and interfaces between the public sector and private/civil society organisations. Municipalities have a wide range of functions and responsibilities, providing welfare services based on national legislation, such as education, social services, health care, cultural as well as technical services (currently two thirds of public services). Municipal service provision has a strong legislative base and is financed by municipal taxes, central government transfers as well as service charges (Kuntaliitto, 2018).

Due to this strong and resourceful role allotted to municipalities, the City of Kotka is in a key position in mitigating socio-economic problems. This is done by addressing marginalisation directly through local policies, programmes and projects supported by

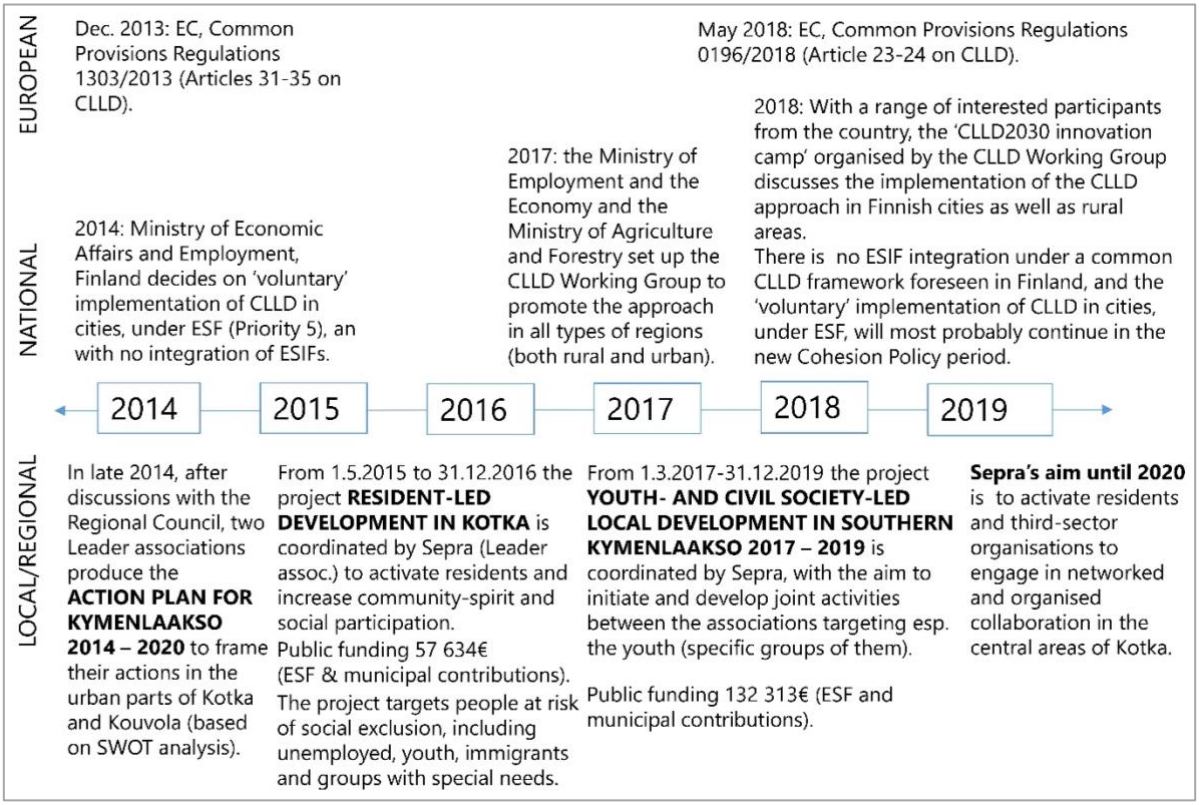
citywide strategies. Although these local strategies have (conventionally) sectoral rather than spatial approaches, and do not usually target specific neighbourhoods, via investments into the development of place-bound infrastructure and services (e.g. new school, library and sports facilities, etc.) the City acknowledges the particular needs of specific areas and improves their situation. The City has also provided tailor-made support services in form of placing a number of professionals from the health and social sector in more deprived neighbourhoods in order to establish direct links to the resident population in need of such services.

There is also a visible "participatory shift" in the City's overall approach to local development. This is indicated by the recently (May 2018) published new City Strategy of Kotka with a timeframe until 2025. "Doing things together", participation and giving residents the opportunity to influence decisions appear to be at the centre of this new strategy. In fact, one of the Strategy's four pillars is "Our shared Kotka – A City of doing things together and jolly encounters". In this spirit, the City recognises even more than before the role of third-sector organisations in tackling social marginalisation, and shows openness to co-operation with them in activities that mitigate the effects of socio-spatial injustices in the city.

The local projects and their embeddedness into higher-level structures and processes

Against this background, civil society organisations led by the association "Leader Sepra ry" (from here on, Sepra), with the backing of the City and Regional Administration, decided to implement the civil-action-based local development component of the Finnish Structural Funds Operational Programme (Priority 5 of the OP 2014-2020, see Figure 2). This is a national variant of deploying the European concept of community-led local development (CLLD), which has recently been taking shape as a Cohesion Policy instrument of the EU for integrated place-based development. Sepra and their local-regional collaborators have found Priority 5 financed from the European Social Fund (ESF) adequate for strengthening their co-operation for the ultimate benefit of the disadvantaged groups they wished to represent.

Also, Kymenlaakso, where Kotka is located, is one of the few regions in Finland where, linked to the national-level instrument of OP Priority 5, the Regional Council has decided to support local civil-action-based initiatives with small-scale preparatory funding. As a result, a regional Action Plan for Civil Society Based Development in Kymenlaakso 2014-2020 could be prepared by Sepra jointly with a similar association from the northern part of the region (Kymen Kasvu), in consultation with their respective urban municipalities. The existence of this Action Plan offered a strong basis for the proposals Sepra (and Kymen Kasvu) submitted for funding under ESF.



Timeline of the initiative: simultaneous and interconnected developments and processes at various levels of governance (Author's own elaboration)

Eventually, from 2015 onwards, two consecutive projects have been implemented by Sepra ("Residents-led local development in Kotka", 2015-2016, and "Youth- and civil society-led local development in southern Kymenlaakso", 2017-2019). Notably, the idea for this initiative comes from an association in charge of implementing the LEADER programme in the surrounding countryside (Pyhtää, Miehikkälä, Virolahti and Hamina being the surrounding "rural" municipalities). Hence, unsurprisingly, the initiative in its actual operations is not limited strictly to the urban part of Kotka – there is intentionally a blurry boundary between Sepra's rural "activation" work and its projects in the city. Also notably, Sepra is known in Finland and Europe for being an interested and active participant in national and European-level forums and discussions concerning the community-led local development method, both related to rural development and the more recent idea of creating an integrated policy instrument centred on similar principles.

Based on rural practice, a bit resembling the "local action groups" of LEADER areas, an Urban Board was set up in Kotka, composed of representatives of civil society associations, local education sector and also members from the City of Kotka. This

Board, chaired by representatives of the initiative's coordinator (Sepra), is at the helm of the implementation of the two consecutive projects. Their budget is around 50 000 euros annually, much of which is spent on management, while a smaller share is used for the implementation of various events, activities, excursions, etc. engaging residents from the vulnerable social groups.

Analysis: processes and capacities shaping local powers of immunity and initiative

The power of immunity

From the EU down to the Regional Council of Kymenlaakso, by multiple tiers of government/governance, the room for the locality and its residents to act "however they wish within the limits imposed by their initiative powers" (Clark, 1984, p. 198) is bargained and influenced. Part of this vertical metagovernance (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009) is through the distribution of financial resources towards the local level, and part of it happens through defining priorities and setting eligibility criteria and conditions for the use of such funds.

EU initiative empowering local stakeholders

The initiative under investigation is building on the wider EU scheme to build a community-led local development instrument (CLLD) "for involving citizens at the local level in developing responses to the social, environmental and economic challenges" in urban areas, laid down in Articles 32-35 of the Common Provisions Regulation (EU) No 1303/2013 (EC 2013) of the European Commission. Inspired by the community-led rural development practices under the LEADER programme, this approach is expected to raise the effectiveness of EU policies (and funding) by providing a route for local communities to take part in shaping the implementation thereof (European Commission, 2014). It appears that the ultimate aim of the European Union is to implement the CLLD approach in all four European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) for their deployment in local development, and thereby empowering the local level in Cohesion Policy and encouraging integrated local development strategies drawn up in a participatory manner. In this, LEADER, seen as a "success story", is taken as an example with its key principles such as area-based local development strategies and their bottom-up elaboration and implementation, local public-private partnership and cooperation in "local action groups" (LAGs), and integrated and multi-sectoral actions. A rather ambitious objective is therefore, to have a single action supported by two or more of the four ESIF at the same time (i.e. multi-funded CLLD), and thus achieve integrated local development (ENRD website). This "ideal model" of community-led

local development, promising a novel mode of governance, is about channelling financial resources to the sub-regional level of decision-making and setting such conditions for this funding that when fulfilled, empower a variety of local stakeholders: giving them voice in decisions that affect their lives in their "localities".

The Finnish deployment of the EU policy affecting the scope of the initiative. Finland, the responsible ministry (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment) decided against the initial idea of the Commission to use the CLLD approach in all regions (both rural and urban) and in all ESIFs, but instead agreed on various ways of partial experiment with CLLD (Åström, 2015). One Finnish solution is that, in the present programming period, Finland's structural funds programme "Sustainable growth and jobs 2014-2020" (a single programme for both ERDF and ESF funds) includes in its 5th Priority Axis the aims of "Social inclusion and combating poverty", to "improve the working and functional capacity of people outside working life"[4]. Its specific objectives are:

- Strengthening social inclusion and working life skills of the most disadvantaged as well as developing measures to prevent social exclusion, particularly where the young, ageing persons and people with partial working capacity are concerned;
- Development of co-operation between various actors and cross-sectoral services as well as the development of related skills;
- Development of communal and citizen-centric approaches and services that enhance social inclusion (Structural Funds Finland).

Despite a limited nature of this "CLLD experiment" (underlined by calling it officially "civil-actor-based development in cities" – *kansalaistoimijalähtöinen kehittäminen kaupungeissa*; own translation, TEM, 2014), the Priority serves the incorporation of at least some of the principles of the EU's "CLLD ideal": local partnership and cooperation and the inclusion of residents in local development. Furthermore, a (local) action plan is required from the applicants for funding, somewhat in line with the idea of an area-based local development strategy. These enforce a place-based and bottom-up approach, giving some space for local-level stakeholders (and ultimately, local

4. Only a few countries of the EU have decided to introduce the CLLD approach, and even fewer examples exist that have ventured as far as to implementing it literally following the EU's proposal (Servillo, 2019). Finland is interesting for the fact that it has adopted some of the basic elements of the CLLD principle, but with a selective "national filter". What is more, Finland has since deployed the CLLD concept in several different practical forms in many (but not all) cities and urban neighbourhoods. Project-based grassroots initiatives such as the one presented in this study is but one of the currently existing solutions in this country. Its qualifying for CLLD may be questioned on the basis of its mono-fund structure (e.g. Servillo does not list it among the genuine, multi-funded CLLD examples in 2019). This study, besides pointing out some of the relative shortcomings attributable to the mono-funded nature of this approach, is also developing an argument that can put this classification into a different light.

residents) in decisions on the ways (some) European funding is used. Moreover, the approach taken in Finland focuses specifically on the prevention and treatment of social/spatial injustices as it draws attention to the inclusion and activation of vulnerable groups in particular, meaning empowerment of the weakest to participate in local development.

However, being funded by ESF alone, a truly multi-sectoral approach (and public-private partnership) is not encouraged, and some local stakeholder groups (e.g. businesses) are more-or-less excluded – or at least, their inclusion as beneficiaries is not directly promoted and funded. The initiative, therefore, can be seen as being limited in its (potential) capacities to address socio-economic inequalities in a more integrated, multi-sectoral – and so, a more innovative – manner (which is intrinsic to the "ideal model" of CLLD). Nevertheless, enhanced "power of immunity" is granted to the sub-regional and local level, Sepra and Kotka-based grassroots actors, by institutionally incorporating them to the structure that delivers European Cohesion Policy (its ESF funding) to serve the final beneficiaries, i.e. local communities, unemployed youth and other vulnerable groups of residents.

A truly multi-sectoral and integrated method being constrained could be one of the reasons why a deliberate spatial focus on neighbourhoods is missing from the initiative's work to support marginalised groups – despite the fact that there are some markedly problematic areas within the city. In other words, the initiative serves the activation of unemployed youth and other vulnerable groups generally in the whole city (as it would make little sense to further concentrate an already narrow sectoral approach to single neighbourhoods). To start with, the (regional) Action Plan and the descriptions for the two consecutive projects do not define clearly the spatial scope of the initiative in Kotka. The "central areas of Kotka" is the most used spatial reference, denoting those areas of Kotka municipality that are not "rural" and thus are excluded from the LEADER programme in southern Kymenlaakso. Concerning the central areas of Kotka, no specific mentions of the problematic areas are made in the documents related to the initiative and its projects. Nevertheless, stakeholders share a pronounced concern with social "hotspots", and a number of participating third-sector organisations have a significant share of their activities in these places. Therefore, it can be assumed that in practice, residents and communities of Karhuvuori and Hovinsaari receive some special attention, and thus the initiative delivers improved spatial justice to them in particular.

Municipal autonomy exercised and reinforced. In terms of administration, Kotka is a municipality within the Finnish unitary system, and as mentioned above, it has a wide range of functions and responsibilities, including those fields where the initiative in

focus operates. The independence of the local level has been reinforced in terms of the utilisation of EU funding to host a place-based action dealing with local social challenges the way local stakeholders see fits best. An example demonstrating such local autonomy was when despite the Regional Council's original idea of an action for the entire region of Kymenlaakso, Sepra backed by the City of Kotka could, through negotiations, insist on a more local and more third-sector-based implementation, maintaining their roles as coordinators and taking ownership of the projects.

Local power of initiative – own resources for corrective procedures

To understand "autonomy" in terms of the "power of initiative" in relation to the studied intervention and its objectives, one can differentiate between two levels of "locality". One is that of grassroots actors teaming up for the projects in focus, and the other is the City (local government) and Kotka municipality as a whole. Furthermore, the existence of particular (distributive) resources and capacities empower the locality (and its local stakeholders) to apply some corrective procedures to spatial injustice, and their resulted actions promote better spatial justice especially by way of further empowerment of the organisations directly engaged with social groups at risk, and Kotka as a whole. In the following, first more detail is offered on what instances of its initiative power are harnessed by the local for the successful implementation of the civil-society driven initiative. After comes a discussion on how the local has been enriched in its power of initiative as a result.

The association Sepra, the local initiator and coordinator, holds relevant resources and represents in itself an important capacity in dealing with social and spatial inequalities in Kotka. This is not only despite but also helped by the fact that this organisation has much relevant experience based on similar activities in the rural hinterland of the city. It owns expertise and experience about community activation and project coordination, and has active network connections related to the rural forms of CLLD in Europe (supported by the LEADER Programme), as well as direct access to information on current national and European policy developments related to its extension to urban contexts (i.e. the "CLLD" debate). Furthermore, consistent with the thematic foci of the two consecutive projects, several local third-sector organisations, including a multicultural hub, an association of non-profit community service centres, local representatives of an NGO supporting children, and the local parish are mobilised. These contribute with their own special knowledge related to various kinds of social/spatial injustices in urban Kotka, and with their direct links to vulnerable individuals, families and neighbourhoods. In sum, locally embedded and practical know-how and proximity and everyday connection to the social groups at risk is paired with a resourceful and committed coordinator who can offer fresh ideas and

understanding gathered from its engagement in various networks on multiple scales (crossing from rural to urban in the region, as well as on the national and international levels).

Another element of the local power of initiative is that of the City and Kotka, and Kotka as a whole. The City's involvement is motivated by previous cooperation with Sepra, and it is in line with the current "participatory shift" in its own approach to local development, also reflecting the recently (May 2018) published new City Strategy of Kotka with a time frame until 2025. "Doing things together", participation and giving residents the opportunity to influence decisions appear to be at the centre of the new Strategy.

Local power of initiative – local outcomes of corrective procedures

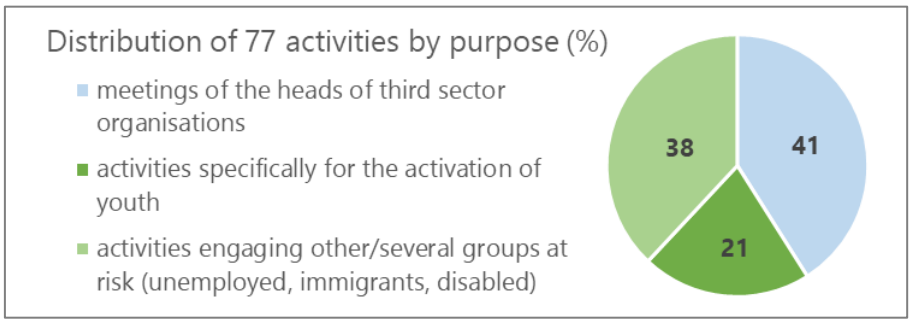
Concerning the outcome of the local projects regarding the "initiative" aspect of local autonomy, three levels of recipients can be distinguished of improved procedures and capacities to battle spatial injustice. The sequence in which they are discussed below reflects the order of significance: the participant associations are the immediate recipients; their target groups of residents are the indirect beneficiaries of the enhanced work of these organisations. Kotka City's own interventions to solve social problems and promote spatial justice are supplemented with new tools and perspectives, and thus the locality benefits as a whole.

Firstly, the most important aspect of outcomes is the empowerment of local third-sector. These organisations, having limited financial capacities, support vulnerable social groups with a "soft" approach. They use tools such as organising events for information, awareness raising and social engagement, volunteer work and peer-support, etc. They can offer the "human touch" to those who are often isolated and distressed due to their particular disadvantage (as unemployed, immigrant or disabled). This kind of work, however, often stays low-profile, visible only to the particular target groups, staying isolated from the rest of the society and too small to be noticed by formal stakeholders, local executives. In light of this, as well as considering the ambition of promoting "residents – or civil – society-led development", it is important that the Urban Board set up within the initiative provides a common platform for these different associations and individual activists, strengthening their partnership and joint impact.

The participating third-sector organisations and activists, despite sharing common values on "social/spatial justice", represent different vulnerable groups, perspectives, priorities and ways of doing things. The Board facilitates collaboration and co-ordination between them for the benefit of all their respective target groups. The

projects and the Urban Board serve for exchanging ideas and good practices between associations and activists from Kotka, planning new (shared) activities, and in general, it helps to formulate a joint understanding of particular (social) problems and their solutions. Led by Sepra, they also offer an interface towards comparable organisations and activities in the rural surroundings, a possibility for pooling dispersed resources (mainly human, knowledge and social capital). In addition, to some extent, the Board supports exchanges and mutual learning between the city and its residents. Finally, the role of Sepra is strengthened as a well-established "expert node" with significant potential for integrating European, national and local perspectives on local and community development. In these many ways, the studied initiative (here especially in the sense of the projects embedded into multi-level governance of cohesion policy) empowers the local civil society organisations involved in it with increased capacities and (more non-material than financial) resources. Consequently, it enhances their joint power of initiative and offer them greater leverage to address local social-economic problems and promote social/spatial justice in Kotka.

Secondly, activation of residents is among the achievements, too. To begin with, the participation of individual citizens in decisions related to the initiative itself (its objectives and scope) was ensured during the preparation phase, i.e. the development of the Kotka-relevant aspects of the Action Plan for Kymenlaakso. This was done by incorporating the results from resident fora organised by the coordinating associations and from citizen opinion polls arranged by Kotka City. Such more direct and formal participation processes (hearings, polls) and close interaction with residents on local needs and potential solutions, however, appear to have been lop-sided towards this preparation phase.



Activities organised by the second project (2017-2019)
(Author's own elaboration)

Nevertheless, the increased number of events and activities organised with and for the target groups provide much opportunity to voice and discuss such needs and solutions. Events directly engaging residents (a bit over a half of all reported events,

see the example of the second project in Figure 3) most often took the form of meeting them at youth centres, community houses or at different associations' premises with the purpose of informing them about the possibilities offered by the project. Other types of activities included, for instance, educational events and assistance in finding summer jobs. Some bigger events have also been held that brought together people from multiple target groups. Those individuals are reached, informed and activated to take part in the life of the local community that need such support probably the most. Although this activation does not imply their direct engagement in "local decisions" on the city-level, it provides good foundations for such participation, and has the potential to generate local exchanges, fresh ideas, increased trust and new cooperation between individuals.

Thirdly, although the Urban Board is composed mainly of civil-society organisations and activists, it also includes an active representative of the City (from its department dealing with the support of youth) as well as a teacher from Kotka's vocational school, as participants of the above listed activities and interactions. As such, there is civil-society-to-city or third-to-public-sector collaboration, too. Although the connection to local decision-making is rather indirect and its impact intangible, it adds to other existing formal and informal forums and exchanges shared locally between these two sectors. This, in turn, may strengthen Kotka, as a locality in its knowledge and toolbox to treat spatial injustice.

Indeed, there are elements in the deployment of the initiative that indicate complementarity and cooperation between the public sector and the grassroots in terms of resources, capacities and competences. The City administration can benefit from working together with this (and similar) civil-sector-driven initiatives. Civil society is more likely to own the "soft" and more nuanced perception and knowledge of processes behind spatial injustice and a more intricate "procedural" understanding of local problems as these tend to arise from everyday contact with specific vulnerable groups. The municipality, on the other hand, has the financial resources backing up a more straightforward, maybe more conventional "distributive" intervention approach, e.g. infrastructural investments to problem neighbourhoods, social aid and subsidies. These two perceptions and ways of intervention can be well combined. For instance, the community houses at various locations in urban Kotka provided by the City offer the physical space for third-sector activities, including some arranged by the projects at hand. To sum up, the Urban Board provides space for the interaction between the formal (municipal) and informal (grassroots) understandings of (respectively, "soft" and "hard" ways of preventing) social marginalisation and exclusion in urban Kotka. Therefore, it develops capacities and strengthens the power of initiative of Kotka as a whole in its dealing with marginalisation and spatial injustice.

Still, the projects led by Sepra appear to be too small to be noticed and used by the local public authorities and decision makers, for instance, as a potential good practice in implementing the "participatory dimension" of the new City Strategy. Also, no direct ways were sought by the third-sector activists for influencing the (preparation of) local decisions by the City administration. These limit the initiative's capacity to increase local autonomy in this particular sense. It is also important to point out that the local private sector is not engaged by this initiative. Their representatives could also have been invited to the Urban Board, in order to include a greater diversity of perspectives. Even their indirect involvement (i.e. not as direct beneficiaries) would help achieve a bit more comprehensive approach to promoting spatial justice. Local small and medium-sized businesses, start-up mentors, incubators and similar organisations would be an important resource to mobilise particularly since key aspects of social and spatial inequalities in Kotka include insufficient levels of employability and equal opportunity for jobs (of youth, immigrants and disabled). Also, for a more spatial approach, i.e. a focus on problematic neighbourhoods, local entrepreneurs and potential employers could be relevant actors as well as resource to mobilise more consciously. Interviewees in fact suggested that small and micro-sized enterprises are not entirely appreciated in Kotka; and entrepreneurial spirit, especially among youth is also rather low in this city in national comparison. Besides, assumedly, the weak presence of (vocational) education institutions as a partner in the initiative can be also the result of it having failed to attract private sector stakeholders into cross-sectoral cooperation. Genuine access to these relevant local stakeholder groups and the resources and capacities they represent would help the Urban Board and their projects further enhance the power of initiative at the local level.

As a final note, it is interesting to mention that it is basically Sepra and its immediate partner associations who are aware that the above-described activities are actually part of an "urban LEADER" experiment. Local residents at large or public administration are little, if at all, conscious of this. This is confirmed by several interviews outside the initiative's local core group, too, and it is also signified by the fact that neither on a symbolic level (logo, title) nor as direct explanation do the notions of the EU funding, the Finnish "Programme for Sustainable Growth and Jobs" appear, for instance, on information sheets and brochures advertising these events. This can be a conscious strategy by Sepra, as this association may have its own interest in extending its LEADER activities to the urban context rather than promoting a "new method" in local governance for improved cohesion/spatial justice. Anyways, the projects of this initiative do not try to directly "advertise" to local residents and stakeholders' values and principles of place-based and bottom-up local development, let alone those of "community-led local development". This somewhat excludes potential participants from national debates on CLLD and makes the initiative miss out on the chance to

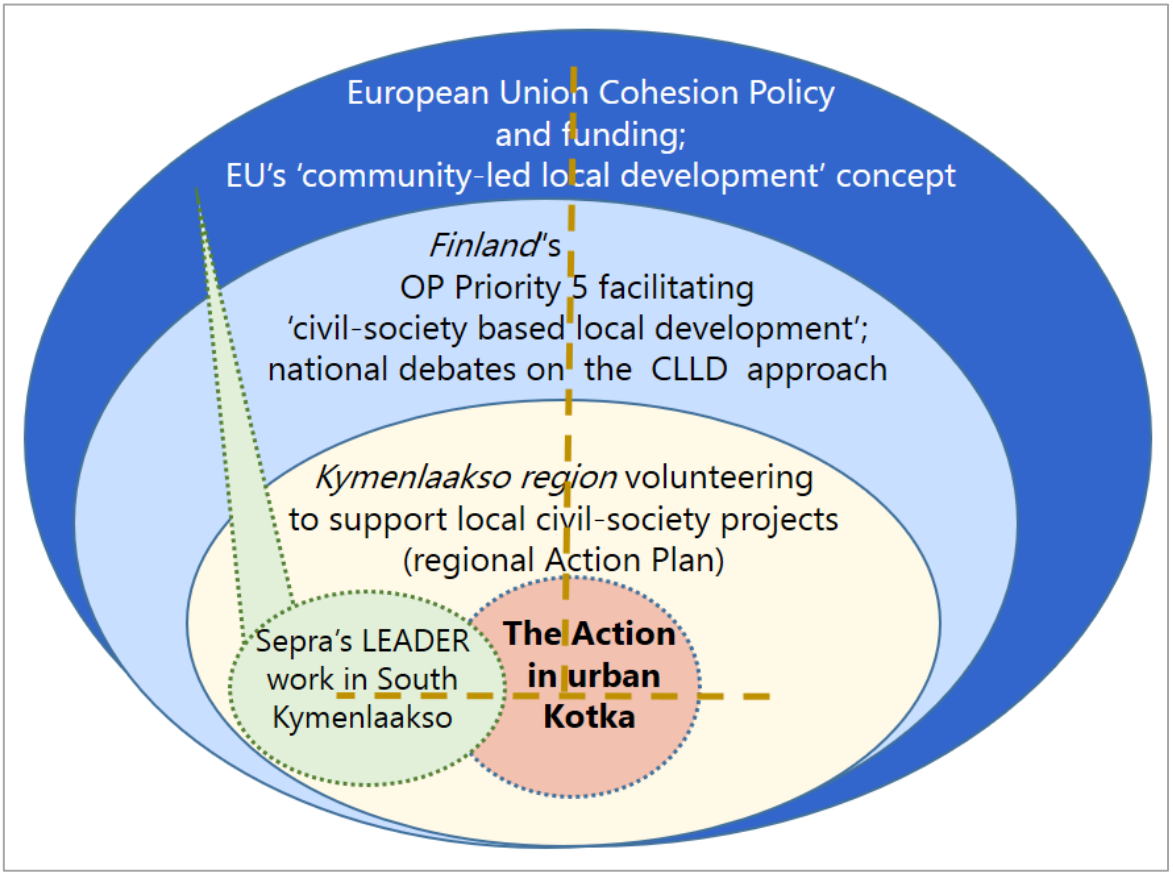
bring European policy, discussions and dilemmas closer to the local level and the "people".

Concluding remarks

Analysing a specific empirical case, the paper aims to contribute to conceptual debates by relating spatial justice to empowerment, and through that, to a broader understanding of local autonomy. It is revealed how processes and the sources of empowerment are tightly intertwined with the dynamic relationship between the distributive and procedural aspects of spatial justice, and how their interactions are complicated further by the fact that they occur on and across multiple levels and operate with an indefinite, fluid concept of "locality".

The fact that the narrative of a local initiative, through its entire course from idea through preparation to deployment, is highly embedded in various vertical, horizontal and transversal relations makes it an especially interesting subject of study for the purposes of this paper (Figure 3). The not only multiscalar but also multidimensional approach adopted in this paper to sociospatial relations, and to the concept of "locality" itself, has helped to get a grasp on what is happening "on the ground" to European and national cohesion policies.

Local autonomy – understood both in terms of the level of empowerment of local civil society and particular vulnerable groups and as the lowest tier of government, the city as a whole – can be seen as both a means and an end to, the promotion of spatial justice. This local autonomy to act upon social/spatial injustice, undeniably compromised and overseen by higher tiers of governance (Clark, 1984, p. 195), is also taking advantage from funding and ideas channelled through the same vertical structure "from above", as well as from other dimensions and connections that cut across scales. Moreover, this local autonomy is used, expressed and improved through multidimensional interactions during the course of the action detailed above.



The embeddedness of the initiative and its multidimensional locality
(Author's own elaboration)

In response to the initial research questions, i.e. "what factors limit and extend the potential of the studied initiative to increase the autonomy of the local level in terms of its power to deal with social/spatial injustices…" and "what dimensions and definitions of "local" emerge in the initiative's intervention logic", the analysis above leads at least to two major observations. One is that the interactions of the distributive and procedural aspects of spatial justice interweave with cross-scale dynamics of empowerment, and the other is that (hence) the definition of the "local" by the intervention and its various actors is very flexible, but actually, it needs to be.

The stakeholders and "locality" of the initiative are set in a multi-layered vertical of administrative-financial structures and processes as well as horizontal and transversal relations. Their embeddedness into the European multi-level governance structures and networks is due both to their receiving funding from the European Social Fund and their linkages to existing and emerging networks of (and debates on) CLLD-type of practices. Despite some of the limitations (e.g. a narrower, not so integrative interpretation of CLLD by Finnish authorities), this embeddedness seems to be more

of a source of empowerment (both by distributive and procedural means) than the impediment of the autonomy (immunity) of local actors.

Various instances of "empowerment" are presented above, linking multi-level structures, processes, interests and resources with stakeholders and beneficiaries involved in reducing marginalisation and social/spatial injustice in Kotka. The factors that expand and limit this action's potential to increase the autonomy of the local level in addressing these problems are to be sought not only in its own intervention logic, but also across the multiple levels that "govern" the intervention despite it having a distinct "bottom-up" nature. These relations represent the multidimensionality of locality when it comes to assessing its sources (powers) of autonomy.

It is true that some part of the place-based solution that the initiative embodies is a matter of choice by the local stakeholders. Examples are the instances of bringing into urban Kotka the experience from work in rural areas, and connecting, combining these two contexts and their solutions. In addition, the projects do not make efforts to reach out to the private sector and use it as a resource. There neither is any evidence for an ambition to get more directly and formally engaged in the formulation of the City Strategy, keeping the initiative and the participant civil-society organisations in a loose and less tangible connection to local decision-making. These "paths not taken" could assumedly lead to strengthened autonomy (regarding both sources of its power) of the third-sector participants as well as Kotka as a whole, in dealing with spatial justice issues. However, some elements are there or missing because they were facilitated/dictated or ruled out by higher tiers. The actual existence of a European/national funding opportunity means additional resources to be spent locally on objectives well-fitting with place-based needs. The coordinating association, Sepra, helped and prepared, for instance, by their "relational" connections and experience regarding EU-funded project coordination, could utilise this opportunity, not minding so much the limitations posed meanwhile to the scope and orientation of activities by the same funding structures.

As a final remark, the vagueness of the notion of "locality" regarding the studied action can be noted. From the perspective of various normative perceptions of spatial (in)justice, the local may be defined either as the neighbourhoods where the activities organised by the two projects have the greatest impact (i.e. those with the highest concentration of people at risk of social marginalisation, a key concern of activists "on the ground"), or as Kotka as a whole, striving to improve its overall image and attractiveness as a place to live (to prevent further youth outmigration and shrinking of tax base). Considering that the projects do not explicitly focus only on the relatively "deprived" areas, maybe the locality of the intervention is actually "urban Kotka". This

fits with the definition by the funding instrument (Priority 5 funded by ESF), and is in line with the involvement of representatives of the City and the idea of having an Urban Board with Kotka-based members to plan and coordinate concrete activities for the engagement and support of vulnerable groups.

Still, this delineation raises some doubt in view of Sepra being the main "local" agent of this initiative: the level of actual intervention may eventually "rise" to the sub-regional level, integrating rural and urban practices of community or resident-led development. This is mainly due to this association's position and special interest or even underlying strategic agenda. Sepra has for long been in charge of rural development work and distribution of funds under the LEADER programme, and it uses now resources and legitimation coming from another policy instrument financed from ESF to extend that work (or at least comparable activities, driven by a common principle) to the urban centre of the same area. Could actually one interpret this in a way that Sepra is compiling its own multi-fund portfolio for carrying out community-led local development type of activities across South Kymenlaakso from three different EU funds (the rural development fund, ESF, and ERDF)? These funds are not integrated on the national level, so in this case the local actors cannot fulfil some of the structural requirements of the ideal model of CLLD. Nevertheless, work on the ground indicates a functional area-based integration driven by a third sector partnership and facilitated, though not so intentionally, by upper tiers of governance.

In conclusion, there are various spatialities and localities present in the story of "local autonomy meeting spatial justice" in Kotka. However, instead of being incongruous or disturbing, these allow for flexible and productive interpretations by and cooperation across diverse levels and actors of governance and policy-making.

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