



Locating transnational city networks in multilevel governance

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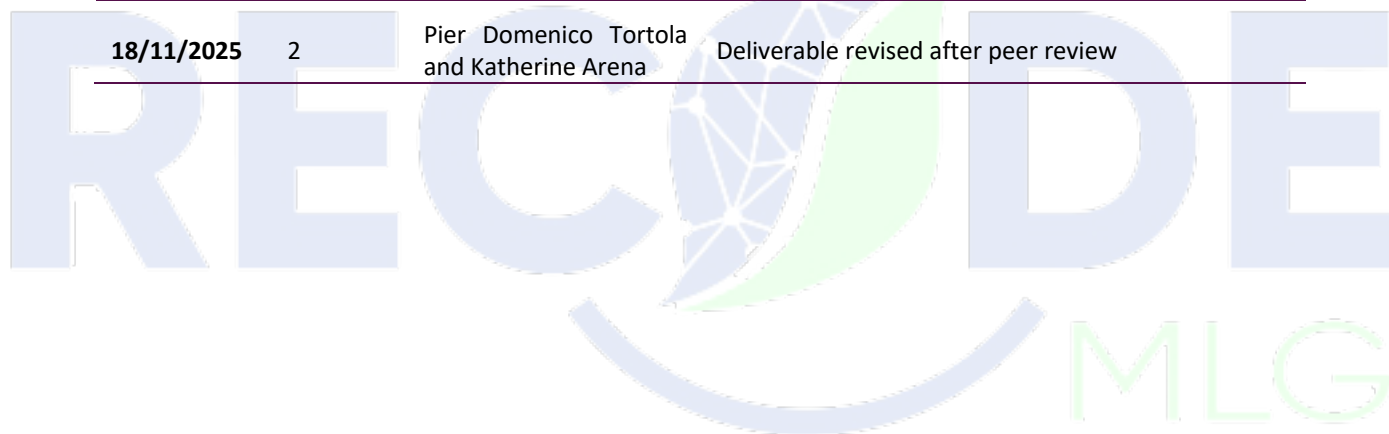
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Conceptualization of the role of city networks within the European system of MLG. Networks represent an interesting intersection of vertical, horizontal, and transnational dynamics that are not easily captured by more traditional definitions of MLG. The work undertaken in this task will fill this gap by identifying the place, functions, limits and opportunities of city networks in EU MLG—ultimately defining the contours of a “type III” MLG. The results of this initial task will result in a research paper on MLG and co-creation (D.3.1), and inform subsequent tasks and deliverables (for example T.6.3 and T.6.4 in WP6).

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Abstract

Transnational city networks (TCNs) are an expanding type of organization throughout the world—above all in Europe, where cities have been densely connected for several decades—and increasingly important players in a number of policy areas. More often than not, these networks link, directly or indirectly, to other levels and actors of governance, thus generating peculiar configurations of multilevel governance (MLG). This paper connects TCNs to the MLG conceptual framework by locating the former within an institutional space defined by the two types of MLG formulated by Hooghe and Marks, and reflecting on some of the implications of TCNs' position in this space. In doing so, the paper achieves two objectives: first, it opens up the dominant MLG typology to accommodate intermediate and hybrid configurations of multilevel governance. Second, based on this reconceptualization, it provides an analytical basis on which to build in subsequent empirical work on city networks.

Keywords: Multilevel governance; transnational city networks; MLG types; EU governance.

1. Introduction¹

Transnational city networks (TCNs)—voluntary organizations that connect municipalities across national borders—are a fast-growing type of organization cutting across, often interacting with, and co-shaping broader multilevel governance systems (Acuto and Leffell 2021; Acuto and Rayner 2016; Tortola 2025a).² TCNs are part and parcel of that process of diffusion of political authority around the world that has been captured under the label of multilevel governance (MLG). They are themselves an example of a new political configuration, and regularly interact with one another as well as with other actors of MLG, thereby generating a number of horizontal and vertical governance connections—above all in Europe, where transnational links among sub-national entities have traditionally thrived in conjunction with (if not as a consequence of) the process of European integration (Kern 2019; Tortola 2025a; Tortola and Couperus 2022).

Despite the existence of a by now sizeable and interdisciplinary body of scholarship on the origins, types, functioning, and consequences of transnational city networks (e.g. Amiri and Sevin 2020; Andonova et al 2027; Bulkeley et al 2003 Cortes et al 2022; Hakelberg 2014; Huggins 2018; Lecavalier and Gordon 2020; Papin 2019), there is still relatively little research connecting TCNs systematically to the broader subject of multilevel governance, aside for a few notable exceptions (e.g. Caponio 2021; 2022; Kern 2019) which, however, remain conceptually under-developed. MLG represents a way to look at public governance from a different perspective which, as mentioned by Piattoni (2009: 166), draws attention to the role of non-central state authorities “and, therefore, to their capacity to cross the gates to the non-domestic (European and international) arena without the keepers’ permission.” Within this approach, the governance role, capabilities, and implications of sub-national authorities such as cities, and networks thereof, have an important place, which deserves further scrutiny.

In an attempt to fill this analytical gap, this paper presents a reconceptualization of MLG, which opens up the traditional classification into Type I and II proposed by Hooghe and Marks (2003; 2010) into a continuous institutional space that can accommodate intermediate and hybrid configurations of multilevel governance. We locate transnational city networks within this space, and examine the implications of their institutional features. In doing so, the

¹ We are grateful to Stefan Gänzle, Amanda Machin, and Sean Müller for helpful comments. The usual disclaimers apply.

² In a recent mapping exercise, Tortola (2025a) identifies 131 currently active transnational city networks worldwide, the vast majority of which established in the past four decades.

paper achieves two main goals: first, it proposes a more fluid and flexible image of MLG, which is more consistent with the variety of institutional cases that are labeled under this name. Second, by embedding city networks within the MLG space, it provides an analytical basis on which to build for future empirical work on TCNs in multilevel governance.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: In the next section, we overview the tenets of multilevel governance, the evolution of this paradigm, and its main criticism. Section 3 then presents the two-type model, and examines its strengths and shortcomings. Building on this, we present a modified view of the model, which reformulates the two types as bounding ends of the MLG institutional space. In Section 4 we go over the role and significance of TCNs as an expanding organizational form. In section 5 we connect TCNs and MLG by identifying the former within the MLG space, and reflecting on some implications of TCNs' institutional features. Section 6 recaps and concludes by sketching a few research directions on TCNs within the European Union context.

2. The development of multilevel governance, and its limits

Multilevel governance is a conceptual framework for the analysis of European integration, as well as a mantra on the functioning of the EU, which has gained footing since being initially introduced in the early 1990s by Gary Marks (1993), and then further developed primarily by Hooghe and Marks (1996; 2001; 2003), as well as a number of other EU scholars building on their writing (e.g. Bache and Flinders 2004; Enderlein, Wälti, and Zürn 2010; Piattoni 2009; 2010). MLG was initially presented as a novel way to understand the European Union that would depart from neofunctionalism and intergovernmentalism, the hitherto dominant paradigms to explain political and institutional dynamics between the supranational and national levels of government (Scharpf 2010). Despite their many differences, these theories relied on a view in which the state and EU were the only two consequential levels of government, able to define the overall direction of policy within the continent (Hooghe and Marks 2001). In contrast to this dualist view, MLG sees politics and governance in Europe as resulting from a more complex web of connections, and a continuous set of exchange and negotiation among and across multiple levels—national, supranational, but also sub-national—which may be balanced in different ways depending on circumstances and policy areas (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Marks, Hooghe, and Blank 1996).

Marks's (1993) first formulation of multilevel governance was driven by a number of transformations in European politics and governance, such as advances in integration connected with the Single European Act (1986) and the Maastricht Treaty (1992), but above all the reform

of the EU's regional policy of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which, among other things, increased the structural funds budget, strengthened both the European Commission's and regions' planning and implementation powers, and established the new instrument of the Cohesion Fund (Hooghe 1996). Taken together, these changes presented a new and qualitatively different governance configuration within the EU, in which power and competences were being transferred from the nation-state upwards and downwards at the same time (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Marks, Hooghe, and Blank 1996). The new picture of European integration proposed by MLG moved beyond purely constitutional analyses of the EU and instead capture the everyday workings of integration. This required two shifts: first, focusing less (or at least not only) on major "history-making" treaty decisions and more on the routine legislation and implementation occurring between them; and second, moving from an emphasis on formal governance structures to examining the entire policy process, including informal rules, practices, negotiations, and interactions that go beyond what is written in law (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Piattoni 2010; Tortola 2017).

In this new MLG configuration, the state by no means disappeared, but went from being the pre-eminent player in European affairs to an (albeit important) actor among several, whose role and impact on governance had to be continuously (re-)negotiated with other territorial tiers. Supranational institutions, such as the European Parliament and the European Commission, hold independent authority beyond what national governments delegate (Hooghe and Marks 2001). Moreover, political arenas are interconnected: subnational actors engage directly at both national and EU levels, forming networks and alliances that transcend borders as well as national gate-keepers. This challenges the traditional state-centric view by rejecting a strict division between domestic and international politics (Hooghe and Marks 2001; Piattoni 2009; 2010).

Another important change focused on the old division of authority within the EU, whereby the Commission held executive authority and member states handled policy implementation. National governments oversee the Commission's executive role, while the Commission itself participates in implementation across several policy areas, often working directly with regional authorities and interest groups. Furthermore, in agenda setting and decision making, the boundaries between institutions were becoming increasingly blurred and contested (Hooghe and Marks 2001). More so since the 1993 revision of the structural funds enhanced the role of economic and social stakeholders (e.g. non-governmental organizations, businesses, universities) under the banner or partnership, hence broadening regional policy-making beyond public authorities (Hooghe 1996; Hooghe and Marks 2001; Piattoni 2009).

Multilevel governance, then, was presented as a conceptualization of European affairs able to encompass the different governance levels within the EU, and capture the complexity of how jurisdictions and levels connect, interact and overlap, among themselves as well as with societal actors (Hooghe and Marks 2010; Piattoni 2010). The interconnectedness of governance levels at which decision-making happens is what sets MLG apart from other theoretical frameworks (Enderlein, Wälti and Zürn 2010). The underlying assumption of multilevel governance is that distributing authority and competences across various levels of government is more efficient compared to concentrating authority within the central state (Hooghe and Marks 2010). Indeed, governance should function across multiple levels to effectively address the differing territorial impacts of policy externalities as well as the varying scale efficiencies from policy to policy (Hooghe and Marks 2010; Stephenson 2013).

Although, as some have noted (e.g. Peters and Pierre 2004; Tortola 2017), MLG may not provide a fully-fledged explanatory theory of European integration and politics, it does offer a clear and intuitive picture of how governance is currently organized—particularly in terms of how the EU functions as both a political system and an operational mechanism (Stephenson 2013). A key innovation of this theory lies in the intersection of vertical and horizontal axes (Piattoni 2009; Zürn 2020). Indeed, multilevel governance entails an identification of levels with territorial jurisdictions, connecting center-periphery, domestic-foreign and state-society dynamics in terms of not just policy-making and institutional development, but also actors' patterns of and avenues for mobilization, and politics more broadly defined (Papadopoulos, Tortola, and Geyer 2024; Piattoni 2009; 2010). This in turn, argues Piattoni (2009, 175), prompts for a “redefinition of the boundaries of territories and jurisdictions within member states.”

Nowadays, multilevel governance is not only a widespread concept in EU studies but also an established principle in European political and administrative practice, which is often indicated as a model for effective policy-making and implementation (Stephenson 2013; Tortola 2017). Over time, it has also expanded beyond its original field of application—the EU and its regional policy—to be used in an increasing number of policy areas and institutional settings, well beyond the European Union (Papadopoulos, Tortola, and Geyer 2024). The breadth and malleability of the MLG idea have no doubt favored this expansion, but are at the same time a double-edged sword for it, as they have led to much criticism about the fuzziness of MLG's boundaries (Peters and Pierre 2004; Tortola 2017). The latter, Peters and Pierre (2004: 88) warn, risks being a term “capable of being invoked in almost any situation.” The lack of conceptual clarity, Piattoni (2009) adds, complicates its operationalization, and

therefore the ability for its propositions to be tested empirically, and for the legitimacy of the structures described by it to be assessed. This, in turn, hinders scholarship's ability to build a consistent language for developing and cumulating descriptive, normative, and especially causal arguments (Tortola 2017).

Tortola (2017) argues that one key area of ambiguity in MLG concerns how formalized governance is, especially in its territorial dimension. While some strands of multilevel governance research have, in line with the stated spirit of Hooghe and Marks's theoretical innovation, reinforced the importance of examining the daily dynamics of politics and policy-making, in many cases, empirical work falls back on the analysis of structural and formalized relationships among territorial levels, making it at times hardly distinguishable from other research programs such as cooperative federalism (Tortola 2017). Another challenge is represented by much MLG scholarship's privileged focus on the vertical axis as opposed to the horizontal one. In principle, MLG connects to a broader paradigm shift, in politics as well as political science, from *government* to *governance*, inclusive of increasing participation of a wide range of societal actors in the management of public matters and, more generally, pointing to "the changing boundaries between public, private and voluntary sectors" (Rhodes 2012: 33). Yet, starting from the work of Hooghe and Marks themselves, vertical relationship, negotiations, and alliances, between and across territorial levels have always had a pre-eminent place compared to the horizontal patterns of power diffusion from state to society. To complicate matters further, however, while the mechanisms through which subnational actors are represented form a key part of MLG, they do not provide equal access to power. Some channels are widely accessible to most regions and localities, while others are limited to the most influential. Similarly, certain channels offer real political influence, whereas others remain largely symbolic (Hooghe and Marks 2001).

3. MLG types as conceptual boundaries

A major step in the development of the multilevel governance paradigm came a decade after the first formulation of the concept, when Hooghe and Marks (2003; 2010) formulated two distinct types of MLG, as a way to better grasp the nature of state authority diffusion across multiple loci. Type I MLG describes

[t]he dispersion of authority to jurisdictions at a limited number of levels. These jurisdictions – international, national, regional, meso, local – are general purpose. That is to say, they bundle together multiple functions, including a range of policy

responsibilities, and in many instances, a court system and representative institutions. The membership boundaries of such jurisdictions do not intersect. This is the case for jurisdictions at any one level, and it is the case for jurisdictions across levels. In this form of governance, every citizen is located in a Russian Doll set of nested jurisdictions, where there is one and only one relevant jurisdiction at any particular territorial scale. Territorial jurisdictions are intended to be, and usually are, stable for several decades or more, though the allocation of policy competencies across levels is flexible (Hooghe and Marks 2010: 17).

Type II, on the other hand, is made of

specialized jurisdictions that, for example, provide a particular local service, solve a common pool resource problem, select a product standard, monitor water quality in a particular river or adjudicate international trade disputes. The number of such jurisdictions is potentially huge, and the scales at which they operate vary finely. And there is no great fixity in their existence. They tend to be lean and flexible – they adapt as demands for governance change (Hooghe and Marks 2010: 17-18).

Type I multilevel governance resembles traditional federal arrangements, characterized by a stable division of responsibilities across a limited number of government levels, each with broad authority over specific territories or policy areas and non-overlapping memberships. In contrast, Type II governance is more fragmented and fluid, consisting of overlapping, single-purpose jurisdictions that lack a fixed structure. Type II multilevel governance typically emerges when a specialized governing body is required to address issues that fall outside the scope or capabilities of Type I organizations—particularly in international contexts or in response to specific functional governance challenges (Piattoni 2009). In sum, MLG enables governance to be tailored to address externalities, scale efficiencies, ecological differences, and public preferences. Both Type I and Type II models offer flexibility in scale, but in different ways. The table below summarizes the distinction between Type I and Type II MLG.

Table 1: Types of multilevel governance

<i>Type I</i>	<i>Type II</i>
General-purpose jurisdictions	Task-specific jurisdictions

Nonintersecting memberships	Intersecting memberships
Jurisdictions at a limited number of levels	No limit to the number of jurisdictional levels
Systemwide architecture	Flexible design

Source: Hooghe and Marks (2003)

We posit that the formulation of the two types is a double-edged sword for the MLG paradigm. On the one hand it introduces significant depth to the concept—in fact it can be seen as one the single most distinctive attempts at transitioning from concept definition to formulating a causal theory of MLG. It does so, among other things, by unmistakably expanding MLG beyond its original place of origin—the EU and regional policy—and turning it into a broader proposition on the transformation of the nation-state, along the lines of the two types. More importantly, in identifying the four key components of the two-type classification (summarized in Table 1) it provides us with a number of clear signposts about what is relevant in making sense of MLG, and aspects on which to anchor further analyses of MLG arrangements.

On the other hand, all the above is achieved in a way that is partly self-contradictory with respect to the definition, and operational applicability of the MLG concept. In the new formulation, the latter is expanded to cover, in principle, an extremely wide and diverse range of empirical phenomena and transformations. At the same time, this is done by means of a binary distinction that seems overly rigid when measured against the empirical reality. Hooghe and Marks' (2010) later indication of the two forms of MLG as Weberian ideal-types only marginally mitigates this rigidity, as it presents the two MLG “bundles” as ultimate manifestations of their respective types, to which no actually existing case might fully conform, but around which most of the empirical instances of MLG are expected to gravitate. However, judging from the illustrative examples used by Hooghe and Marks themselves, this condition is, at best, applicable to the most familiar and traditional Type I, but not too convincingly to Type II.

In sum, the two types reformulate the concept of MLG as very broad but too restrictive at the same time, leaving it vulnerable to criticism. Bache, Bartle, and Flinders (2016: 528), for instance, argue that multilevel governance, the way we know it today, remains an “underdeveloped and fuzzy concept,” and that the two types lack rigor and precision. The distinction between general purpose and task-specific division, for instance, is not always clear-cut. Furthermore, the dichotomy of voice and deliberation (Type I) vs the exit and choice (Type

II) is problematic, due to the lack of clarity on how much choice is available for Type II jurisdictions and how easy it actually is for institutional units to exit these arrangements. In real governance instances it is hard to keep Type I and Type II separate, as they are often mixed and interconnected. Looking closely at Hooghe and Marks's (2003; 2010) elaboration of the two types—and particularly Type II—it emerges that many of their own empirical illustrations are far from exemplary manifestations of their theoretical models. In sum, despite the merits of the classification, we should be careful not to take the two types too uncritically, and overestimate their internal coherence, their correspondence to empirical reality, and ultimately their ability to “carve nature at its joints,” so to speak.

The argument that we should be going beyond the binary MLG classification is also raised by other authors, including Scharpf (2010), who reframe the contrast and underlying tension between Type I and Type II governance as a search for the “optimal scale of government”—a level that is both effective in addressing collective problems by operating at a scale large enough to achieve technically sound solutions, and democratic by being small enough to respect individual preferences without requiring major compromises. Another challenge related to this dichotomy, argues Skelcher (2005), is the asymmetry regarding legitimacy and accountability between Type I and Type II. Indeed, traditional governmental institutions (Type I) are formally recognized as the legitimate authority for their communities, and are accompanied by democratic processes that reflect and distribute collective values. Their representative structures provide both symbolic and practical mechanisms to ensure legitimacy and accountability. In contrast, more specialized or task-oriented bodies (Type II) tend to have weaker democratic foundations, maintaining only loose connections to representative institutions, even when they support or engage with them.

Where does all the above leave us? We posit that one way to relax the dualism of the two-type classification, while retaining its advantages, is to abandon the idea that the two types (and their respective features) are necessarily “logically coherent and [...] alternatives responses to fundamental problems of coordination” (Hooghe and Marks 2003: 234), and instead reformulate them as marking the boundaries of a four-dimensional conceptual space (one dimension per defining feature of the types), within which empirical instances of MLG can be located at different (and partly independent) points along the four continua. So redefined, Hooghe and Marks's two types may still exist, but as cases that happen to be located at the same end of each of the four continua, rather than as ideal-typical or in any case “purer” manifestations of MLG. Figure 1 summarizes this reconceptualization of MLG.

Figure 1: The reconceptualized space of MLG

<i>Type I</i>	<i>MLG space</i>	<i>Type II</i>
General-purpose jurisdictions	← ----- →	Task-specific jurisdictions
Nonintersecting memberships	← ----- →	Intersecting memberships
Jurisdictions at a limited number of levels	← ----- →	No limit to the number of jurisdictional levels
Systemwide architecture	← ----- →	Flexible design

Within this adapted model of MLG we can already locate some institutional setups that Hooghe and Marks (2003; 2010) tend to present as Type II, but which contain at least some traits that are more akin to Type I—and which therefore move in that middle space that Bartle, Bache and Flinders (2016) urge us to explore more systematically. Examples include cross-border regions, which represent ad hoc, problem-oriented jurisdictions that frequently manifest as inter-regional commissions, task forces, or inter-city agencies (Hooghe and Marks 2010). Characterized by their functional specificity, these governance arrangements nonetheless intersect and overlap with territorial jurisdictions fully embedded within Type I arrangements, in order to enhance their institutional effectiveness and coordination. Similar conclusions can be drawn on macro-regions as defined by the European Union: “policy frameworks for cooperation for a given transnational geographical area including several countries” (ESPON, 2020). Aptly labelled by Gänzle and Kern (2016, 5) as “hybrids between territorial and functional regions”, macro-regional strategies are, again, arrangements that blend elements of both Type I and Type II. They reflect Type I characteristics through their integration into the EU’s systemwide institutional framework, operating at a limited number of hierarchical levels. Simultaneously, they exhibit Type II features, including task-specific governance focused on thematic priorities, flexible and adaptive structures, intersecting memberships and the absence of rigid limits on jurisdictional levels. Finally, international organizations, and especially generalist ones such as the United Nations, could be indicated as institutions which Hooghe and Marks tend to connect to Type II, but which in many cases present Type I features, such as a clear pattern of vertical jurisdictional embedding.

Interpreting the two-type classification as bounding a conceptual and institutional space for MLG allows us to use the theoretical guidelines provided by Hooghe and Marks in a way that is more flexible and therefore more consistent with the diverse landscape of multilevel governance. For each particular institutional form, we can assess its position on each of the four

continua, and formulate at least initial expectations on its working and consequences based on this. In the next section we will conduct this sort of analysis on what we deem to be a good example of MLG that occurs in the middle of the space identified above, namely transnational city networks.

4. Transnational city networks as a growing type of organization

Transnational city networks (TCNs)³ are horizontal organizations linking municipalities across national borders with the aim of performing a number of (soft) governance functions, such as exchanging know-how and best practices, developing policy standards, providing technical help, building local administrative capacities, managing joint projects, formulating joint policies and initiatives, and promoting the interests of members internationally (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Abdullah and Garcia-Chueca 2020; Grønnestad and Nielsen 2022; Tortola 2025a). The expansion of TCNs in the past few decades has been a key embodiment of cities' increasing international role, and has accompanied a number of broader, and in part causally connected, political transformations, such as globalization, European integration, administrative decentralization, as well as the increasing pressures coming from cross-boundary policy challenges (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Acuto and Leffel 2021; Payre 2010; Tortola 2025a). While comprehensive and reliable data on TCNs is hard to come by, existing mapping exercises generally concur in identifying the past three to four decades as a 'golden age' for municipal networking, with these organizations not only growing in absolute numbers, and geographic coverage, but also covering an ever broader range of policy areas (e.g. Acuto and Rayner 2016; Tavares 2016; Tortola 2025a; Tortola and Couperus 2022). Traditionally strong in the area of environmental and energy policy—fostered by, among other things, the United Nations' Agenda 21 process (Abdullah and Garcia-Chueca 2020; Acuto and Leffel 2021)—city networking has, in recent years, expanded to cover many other policy areas presenting cross-border and transnational challenges. These have included, lately, the field of digitalization, and its connections to green policies under the label of "twin transition"—a pairing that has quite tangible manifestations at the local level, in the first place the pursuit of "smart city" policies (e.g. European Commission 2025b).

Combining local territorial focus with transnational collaboration and flexible and adaptable structures, transnational city networks are a very distinctive type of organization,

³ In this paper, we use the term transnational city networks as a synonym of 'transnational municipal networks,' another term often employed to indicate this type of organization.

which poses, very much like multilevel governance, both policy and polity questions (Piattoni 2010; Tortola 2025a). Accordingly, a by now rich and interdisciplinary scholarship has developed on the subject of TCNs, tackling on the one hand a number of empirical questions such as networks' impact on global and local policies (e.g. Busch 2015; Foster and Swiney, 2021; Papin, 2019; Toly, 2008; Tjandradewi and Marcotullio, 2009), as well as dynamics of power, influence and competition within and across networks (e.g. Bulkeley et al., 2003; Kern and Bulkeley, 2009 Mocca 2018), and on the other hand engaging with more theoretical and structural issues on the implications of these networks on the Westphalian state system (e.g. Brenner 2004; Curtis 2016), together with normative questions on the democracy, legitimacy, and effectiveness of cities' transnational mobilization (e.g. Barber 2013; Martinez 2023). As Szpak et al. (2022) note, state governments not only often lack the influence to drive change internationally, but they are also too large and distant to address local or subnational challenges effectively. In such cases, cities and city networks appear better positioned to respond due to their economic, cultural, and intellectual assets, which can rival those of nation-states in many respects—although they lack sovereignty and the monopoly on the use of force, which remain the domain of states.

Connecting to the foregoing are also the advantages that TCNs may present vis-à-vis recent practices of policy co-creation, compared to more traditional institutions. Co-creation is a multi-actor process of policy formation and implementation that relies centrally on the cooperation between public authorities on the one hand, and citizens and other societal stakeholders on the other (Bentzen 2022; Leino and Puumala 2021; Marjanović et al. 2025). While co-creation may increase the effectiveness, impact, and legitimacy of policy-making via “shared ownership, distributed leadership, and joint steering of public issues within complex, polycentric governance systems” (Marjanović et al. 2025: 21), an important limit to it is that it is, by its nature, most successfully organized and deployed in small scale settings, and primarily at the local level. In this respect, TCNs may play an important role in the scaling up of co-creation beyond its usually local dimension, by promoting this policy innovation among its members, favoring its horizontal diffusion, and bringing their results to bear in international and supranational political contexts.

TCNs connect to multilevel governance in a twofold way. In the first place, they can be seen as MLG manifestations in and of themselves, as they embody one of the ways in which pieces of state authority and policy initiative are relocated downwards, upwards, and sideways. In the second place, municipal networks do not operate in a vacuum, but are connected to, at times promoted by, or even embedded in, other multi-level political and institutional players

composing the complex architecture of global governance, above all the European Union, but also other important international and regional organizations such as the United Nations, and the Council of Europe (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Tortola 2025a). The many conceptual and empirical links between MLG and TCNs are not matched in academic scholarship, where the two research agendas have developed largely in parallel, and intersections between them have been few and far in between. Whenever the connection between the two strands of research has been made more explicitly and systematically (e.g. Betsill and Bulkeley 2006; Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Caponio 2021; 2022; Szpak et al. 2022), its analytical payoffs have come across quite forcefully. A key point raised by Kern and Bulkeley (2009: 313) is that city networks are a “potentially important constituent of both structure of European multi-level governance and its dynamics.” This argument is, in turn, brought forward with respect to three dynamics. First, EU legal and financial instruments significantly affect local governments—a process referred to as top-down vertical Europeanization. This is particularly evident in areas such as environmental and sustainable development policy, where EU-level decision-making has come to outweigh national-level initiatives. Transnational city networks also support, in some cases, the implementation of EU policies. Second, local authorities are increasingly influencing EU policy-making, not only indirectly through national associations, but also directly by engaging at the European level—an example of bottom-up vertical Europeanization. Third, European cities and towns are constitutive elements for horizontal Europeanization as they engage in transnational cooperation, share experiences, and collaboratively develop innovative responses to common challenges. Additionally, EU institutions—particularly the European Commission—have become increasingly reliant on organizations such as TCNs for external information and expert input, thereby improving these organizations’ access to EU policy-making processes (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008).

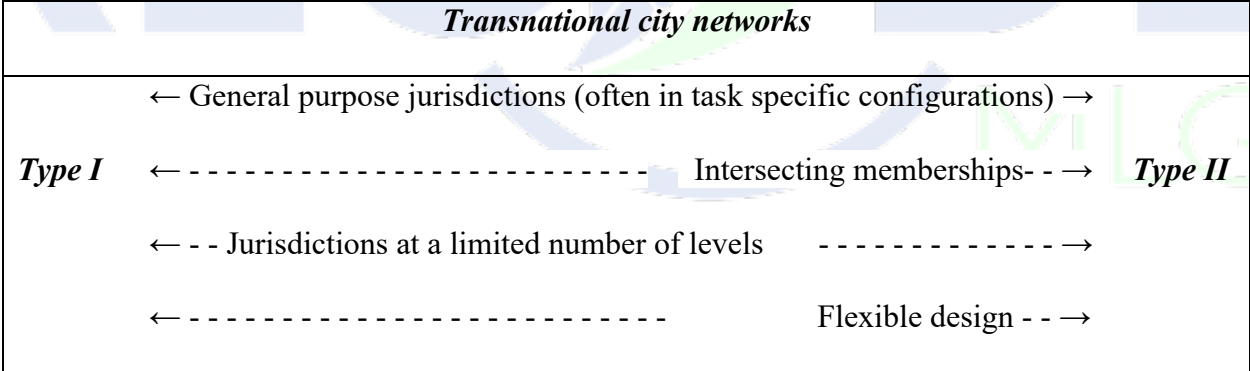
For the most part, scholars analyzing TCNs in connection to the MLG framework tend to place these networks, more or less explicitly, in the Type II category (e.g. Betsill and Bulkeley 2006; Gustavsson, Elander and Lundmark 2009; Nielsen and Papin 2021; Szpak et al. 2022). This is unsurprising if accept the dichotomous classification proposed by Hooghe and Marks, if nothing else by negative argumentation: as TCNs are clearly not quasi-federal Type I arrangements, they can only be expressions of Type II MLG. As we have argued in the previous section, however, this risks artificially flattening a variegated empirical reality on a catch-all category and, as a result, losing sight of important institutional information and nuances of city networks. Examining the latter within a continuous MLG space of the sort summarized in Figure 1 above, on the other hand, will allow for a more flexible, and accurate

description of TCNs as manifestations of multilevel governance, and implications thereof. We present such an analysis in the next section.

5. Multilevel governance and transnational city networks

If looked at closely enough, any family of institutions will appear too diverse to be summarized univocally. This is particularly true of the family of transnational city networks, which varies quite widely across a number of institutional variables. TCNs vary not only in size (ranging from a handful to thousands of member cities), and the policy areas in which they operate, but also, among other things, in territorial reach (e.g. regional, continental, global), institutional and financial wherewithal; internal structuring (e.g. single- or multi-layered; member- or secretariat-led), as well as, of course, the functions in which they specialize and the intensity with which they pursue their goals, with some networks being primarily vehicles for their members’ international projection, while others conducting more autonomous and substantial policy work (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Lecavalier and Gordon 2020; Tortola 2025a). That said, the landscape of TCNs contains enough common denominators to allow for a number of general observations on their status as multilevel governance institutions. Table 2 summarizes the position of city networks within the MLG space identified earlier in the paper.

Figure 2: Transnational city networks in the MLG space



TCNs are, in the first place, organizations linking general purpose institutions—cities—in institutional configurations that are often (but not always) driven by specific policy goals. This places TCNs roughly in the middle of MLG’s first continuum: on the one hand, networks are layered on top of existing Type I institutions, creating new and flexible connections whose boundaries do not correspond with any of the latter’s jurisdictions. On the other hand, their link to the underlying general-purpose, and democratic jurisdictions remains direct and very strong, more so since networks have, by and large, only soft governance functions and capabilities, and are therefore quite dependent on the authority and legitimacy of their principals in their work.

The policy remit of TCNs is, in the majority of cases, more narrowly defined than that of Type I institutions. However, in virtually no case can this remit be boiled down to a specific “task,” and more often than not networks operate in more than one single policy area, thereby having a broader range than one would expect from pure Type II institutions (Acuto and Leffell 2021; Tortola 2025a). Even more to the point, in a significant number of cases, TCNs have generalist policy missions, covering many, if not most, of the areas in which the member cities operate in their respective domestic contexts. This group includes prominent organizations such as the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Eurocities, The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), and the Global Parliament of Mayors (Acuto and Leffell 2021; Tortola 2025b). A notable departure from the task-specific Type II model, these kinds of network perform tasks that are more akin to Type I organizations, such as general interest representation, or policy formulation (Barber 2013; Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008).

The foregoing is nowhere clearer than in the case of generalist networks operating within well-defined regions, in which other MLG structures operate—above all the European Union. Here, networks such as the CEMR or Eurocities have, over time, established themselves as habitual—if not even quasi-official—channels for the representation of urban interests, perspectives, and expertise within EU-level political and policy processes (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008; Tortola 2013). Having become “dominant games in town” in the area of all-purpose city networking, these organizations also limit, *de facto*, exit opportunities for their members, which would simply not have many viable alternatives within Europe’s geographic and political space. This is yet another departure from the logic of Type II multilevel governance.

Seen in its entirety, the landscape of TCNs is characterized by intersecting memberships, hence leaning clearly towards Type II along this second axis. Each single city may be a member of as many transnational networks as it wishes and needs, within the confines of its capabilities. An important caveat, however, is that the intersection of network memberships is not always functionally driven, as one would expect of Type II multilevel governance. While in many cases, cities decide to join specific networks because they are the most cost-efficient way to achieve a specific transnational purpose, this is often not the only, or even their main motivating factor. Networking may be driven, for instance, by “community” logics of the sort found in Type I institutions, such as in the case of regional associations of cities, or other networks based on other cultural commonalities among members, e.g. the Arab Towns Organization, the *Association Internationale des Maires Francophones*, the Organization of Islamic Capitals and Cities, or the Union of Ibero-American Capital Cities

(Tortola 2025b). In other cases, the decision to join a network may be based on more mundane, or even fortuitous factors, such as the public prominence of the organization, of pre-existing contacts across mayors or city administrators (Taveirne and Derudder 2024; Tortola and Couperus 2022).

In a similar vein—and partly as a consequence of these micro-level dynamics—the coexistence of organizations within the broader city network landscape is characterized in part by patterns of functional specialization and division of labor, but in part also by institutional overlap, or even duplication. To be sure, this is not all bad: the coexistence of network performing similar functions (and in some cases for the same cities) may give rise to productive exchanges and healthy patterns of competition, which in turn may stimulate governance innovation. In some cases, however, institutional redundancies and fragmentation may also lead to waste of energies and resources, as well as the loss of policy synergies and economies of scale (Capello 2000; Lusk and Gunkel 2018).

As regards the third dimension of the multilevel governance space, taken together, the set of existing transnational city networks may create a potentially unlimited number of governance levels, especially when considering the possibility of intersecting membership discussed above. Each single city may be involved in multiple networks operating at different geographic scales: from cross-boundary to regional, to global. However, the extent to which these may be considered “levels” (let alone “jurisdictions”) of the same institutional ecosystem is questionable, given that these organizations are largely independent from one another. At the same time, institutional complexity remains very limited *within* networks, which are usually structured around two main levels—the city and the network itself—with the addition, in some cases, of one or two intermediate levels defined most commonly in terms of different membership tiers (full vs associated members) or regional sub-networks.

The latter case is quite interesting as it shows how some of the largest TCNs, such as the aforementioned UCLG, or International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), opt for quasi-federal organizational logics that are akin to, and follow the existing boundaries of, Type I institutions. This enhances their status as comprehensive organizations, and the privileged role they hold as interlocutors of state-centered international institutions, such as the United Nations, whose institutional architecture they complement by providing channels for the global articulation of urban interests (Martinez 2023) It might, however, also make any issues of representativeness, which might still exist whenever city membership is exclusive (such as in ICLEI), less visible, and hence underestimated, in the context of their geopolitical reach (Fenton and Busch 2016).

Finally, transnational city networks possess a high degree of institutional fluidity, which places them closer to Type II MLG in the space identified above. This holds both for the networks themselves, which come and go on a regular basis, making this institutional landscape a constantly moving target, and for each network's membership base, which is also in a near-constant state of flux (Acuto and Rayner 2016; Tortola 2025a). The flexibility of city networks is a positive feature, insofar as it translates into adaptability to topic, need, and circumstances. In this respect, flexibility may be seen as a factor of efficiency, pushing out networks that do no longer serve their purposes, or allowing cities to join or leave organizations according to their needs. This is compounded by within-network flexibility, whereby sub-sets of city members, especially of the larger TCNs, join forces in variable configurations for specific projects, tasks or initiatives, as they see fit.

As highlighted before, however, cost-efficiency is by no means the sole factor behind city networking, and the transformations of this ecosystem. Additionally, one should highlight, as a counterpart of fluidity in this institutional landscape, the permanence of a few prominent networks—such as the already mentioned Eurocities, UCLG, and ICLEI, but also C40, or the Covenant of Mayors, to mention just a few—which have become key players in the world of city networking, and whose success may contribute to the impermanence of (or even to preempting) other networks, which cannot match the competition in an institutional environment that is beginning to show signs of saturation (Tortola 2025a). Once again, this can be interpreted in a positive light, to the extent that it favors the consolidation of these “usual suspects,” their influence, and the political and governance benefits that they can bring to cities in the international arena. It might, however, also end up posing unnecessary entrance and survival barriers for many minor networks, ultimately stifling that virtuous competition for innovative governance to which we have referred above.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this paper has been to present a conceptual examination of transnational city networks in connection with the multilevel governance analytical approach. To do so, we have, first, proposed a new interpretation of the well-known two-type classification of MLG as a continuous institutional space within which various real-world manifestations of multilevel governance may be placed. Within this space, we have then located city networks based on a few key features of this kind of organization and ecosystem thereof. This has, in turn, allowed us to reflect on a number of important aspects of TCNs as embodiments of multilevel governance.

Each of the features of TCNs discussed in the previous section, and its implications on politics and governance, can generate a number of important questions to be further pursued both theoretically and empirically, whether looking at networks in isolation or, perhaps more interestingly, connecting them to other players of multilevel governance. This exploration is well beyond the scope of this analysis, but to conclude our paper we can at least sketch a few promising lines of investigation that link city networks and the politico-institutional system of the European Union—the cradle of multilevel governance and still, arguably, its most paradigmatic instance. In doing so we take inspiration from Kern and Bulkeley's (2009) distinction between vertical (bottom-up and top-down) and horizontal dynamics of interactions between networks and the EU.

As discussed earlier in the paper, one of the key roles of transnational city networks is to represent their members' interests and lobby for them in supranational contexts. This is a well-established function within the EU, where TCNs are part and parcel of the universe of societal and institutional stakeholders participating in the Brussels policy process (Heinelt and Niederhafner 2008; Kern 2019; Kern and Bulkeley 2009). This role poses a number of interesting questions concerning, in the first place, the drivers and process of preference formation within TCNs—most notably patterns of influence and leadership among members—and subsequently city networks' role in and impact on EU policy-making, in particular tracing differences in access and influence of different organizations, and the consequences of dynamics of inter-network competition or cooperation within the policy process. In connection to this, more normative questions around the representativeness, accountability, and legitimacy of networks' participation in the formation of EU policy should also be investigated further.

Looking at top-down vertical dynamics, research should focus first and foremost on TCNs as instruments and players in the process of local level Europeanization (Kern and Bulkeley 2009; Marshall 2005). The EU's influence on networks and their members may come through different mechanisms, the most important of which are perhaps participation in European projects on the part of formally independent TCNs, and the EU's own sponsorship and instigation of city networking—for example via the longstanding URBACT program, or the most recent Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities initiative (European Commission 2025a). An interesting line of research would connect the institutional setup of city networks—in the first place looking at the difference between independent and EU-sponsored TCNs—to the mechanisms, results, as well as durability of local Europeanization (Adshead 2014; Tortola 2016). Another set of questions might revolve around the differences between networked and non-networked cities in the process of Europeanization, not just to gauge the value added of

networking in this respect, but also to investigate the less intuitive question of any possible disadvantages that being in a TCN might bring about, for instance policy rigidities coming from path dependence or even network-induced “groupthink.”

When it comes to horizontal dynamics, finally, what seems to be of immediate interest (besides the horizontal aspects already implicit in the vertical dynamics just discussed), is the issue of how the EU-TCNs nexus intersects with the extra-EU geographic reach of many such city networks. Future research should focus, in particular, on the extent to which networks may act, more or less intentionally, as channels for the “export” of local level Europeanization outside EU borders, or alternatively convey ideas and practices on local level governance from the outside in. Research should focus not just on the pros and cons of either movement on governance effectiveness and innovation, but also, once again, on the many normative problems of representativeness and accountability that such flows of policy influence might present.

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