

Local Governments as Missing Actors in Occupational Safety Governance

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Occupational safety and health (OSH) outcomes have been increasingly influenced not only by legal frameworks and workplace-level practices, but also by the governance capacity of institutions that act at the local or regional levels. This study aims to explore the role of local governments in multi-level OSH governance systems, which is an important knowledge gap in safety science literature where local governments have often been viewed as peripheral or supplementary actors. A qualitative comparative study approach is used in this study, with documentary study findings from Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye aimed at exploring how OSH governance influences local governments in OSH prevention, coordination, and crisis management. The findings of this study have revealed that European countries with multi-level governance systems that integrate local governments using formal mandates, coordination mechanisms, or preventive infrastructure have been more effective in OSH prevention, coordination, and crisis management. However, in the case of Türkiye, there is a highly centralized OSH system with limited integration of local governments, which is likely to have limited OSH prevention-oriented practices. The study on Serbia reveals that there is limited integration of local governments in OSH governance in the country, but with limited institutionalization. The findings of this study have revealed that local governments have been an important but not well-integrated part of OSH governance. A key recommendation of this study concerns the need of developing local institutional capacity in OSH governance.

Keywords: safety governance, local governments, multi-level regulation, occupational safety, occupational health

1 Introduction

Occupational safety and health (OSH) management in regional communities transcends the traditional role of OSH as a mere technical dimension of working life. It encompasses a multi-dimensional domain of governance that affects social well-being, economic security, and sustainable developmental paths. The contemporary safety science, in particular, increasingly acknowledges occupational safety as a foundational pillar of economic growth, social equity,

and preservation of human capital. In this regard, the provision of safe and healthy working environments no longer merely focuses on the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases. Instead, it becomes a strategic tool that improves quality of life, enhances productivity, and reinforces the resilience and competitiveness of regional and local economies (Zanko & Dawson, 2012; Sorensen et al., 2021).

The provision of occupational safety in regional communities does not merely rest on the shoulders of employers. Instead, it becomes a joint and collective governance task for local governments, trade unions, civil society, and workers. Among these groups, local governments assume a very strategic role. Their proximity to working life and the presence of a regulatory, coordinating, and service-delivery role enable them to become a bridge between the national OSH regimes on the one hand, and working life on the other. In this context, occupational safety management no longer merely becomes a task of ensuring compliance with the law. Instead, it becomes a hallmark of quality of governance, institutional capabilities, and social solidarity in local governments (Walters et al., 2018; Salguero-Caparrós et al., 2020).

Based on comparative international evidence, it has been found that the effectiveness of OSH governance also varies significantly across countries in terms of the degree of decentralization and capacity for coordination and governance. In Germany, OSH governance is a part of a broader corporatist and insurance-based system in which sectoral accident insurance institutions and public authorities work together. While regulatory authority is vested in national governments, regional and local institutions play an important facilitating role in terms of coordination and integration of prevention activities, while supporting enterprises, especially SMEs, and embedding OSH issues in regional economic development strategies. This is an important example that demonstrates the potential for coordination and integration at the local and sectoral levels through formal coordination structures (Rothstein et al., 2020). Serbia is an important case that exemplifies OSH governance in a transition economy undergoing significant institutional reform and integration into the European Union. While the OSH legislation in place is similar to that in other EU member states, the capacity for effective OSH governance at the regional and local levels is uneven. Local governments face challenges in terms of technical capacity and coordination. OSH practices in regional communities are often reactive and driven by regulatory compliance. This is an important case that demonstrates the need for capacity development in terms of effective OSH governance at the local levels (Uvalic, 2012). In contrast, in Türkiye, OSH governance is highly centralized and is supported by a comprehensive national regulatory framework, particularly the *Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331 (2012)*. However, significant differences in terms of formalized OSH practices are also observed at the regional levels. For instance, in the areas with higher industrial concentrations, OSH practices are relatively formalized, whereas in the areas dominated by SMEs, there is often a deficiency in inspection capacity and awareness (Isik, 2026).

2 Literature review

2.1 Regional Communities, Crisis Conditions, and the Integration of Occupational Safety into Social Security Governance

Whereas in the past, occupational safety research took place in an environment of relatively stable conditions, current research is increasingly pointing to the role of crisis conditions in safety governance. Natural disasters, economic crises, wars, and health crises, among other incidents, are increasingly being recognized to expose not only safety risks but also limitations in institutional coordination, social resiliency, and governance capabilities in regional settings (Lobel, 2005). All these call for rethinking and re-evaluating safety governance in regional settings.

Recent research in safety governance in regional settings has increasingly pointed to the fact that security in such settings can no longer be understood in terms of responding to crises or through state intervention. On the other hand, it is increasingly being understood in terms of societal responsibility, with every member of society contributing to it. Participatory and community-based governance is increasingly being recognized as an alternative way of governance in regional settings. In such an understanding of governance, safety is no longer being understood in terms of its role in governance (Hansen & Antonsen, 2024). Nowadays, OSH can hardly be perceived solely as a reactionary function geared towards resolving crises at the individual workplace level. Instead, it can be described as a societal function that ensures resilience, effectiveness of institutions, and sustainability. Within this definition, safety becomes a critical element of resiliency on the societal level. In other words, prevention from the occupational standpoint will contribute to the overall quality of life, safety of the environment, transparency of governance, and active citizenship. This approach fits contemporary OSH practices well as it focuses on prevention and preparedness. Furthermore, research shows that resiliency is likely to increase public trust in institutions and make them more effective, especially under conditions of a crisis (Jain et al., 2018; Friend & Kohn, 2023).

Occupational safety thus presents itself as an essential factor in social stability and sustainability in regions. The presence of safe and healthy working environments is conducive to economic continuity and is also essential in reinforcing safety culture in regions. It is therefore imperative that the minimization of accidents and diseases in the workplace be viewed not only as an essential aspect of compliance but also as an essential strategy in maintaining social stability during systemic crises (Forastieri, 2016).

It is also essential to present comparative examples of the level of integration of institutions in different regions. In Germany, occupational safety is present in multi-level governance structures in the form of sectoral accident insurance systems, which also include regional and local government actors (Scholtes et al., 2017). Serbia and Türkiye have also witnessed significant national-level OSH system reforms, but the level of integration of local government institutions is still relatively low. Serbia's alignment with European Union standards has improved the formal compliance in the country, but the presence of significant disparities and capacity constraints in local government is still a challenge in the minimization of accidents and diseases in the workplace (Đinđić & Bajić, 2018). Türkiye has also witnessed

significant national-level OSH system reforms in the form of the comprehensive system of laws established under the [Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331](#), but the recent crises of earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed significant gaps with the level of integration of local government institutions in the minimization of accidents and diseases in the workplace. Local government institutions in Türkiye are structurally present in the capacity to integrate OSH governance with social resilience, but this potential remains largely untapped ([Tekin-Apaydin, 2024](#)).

The wider literature also points to the fact that sustainability in regional security is not only dependent on physical infrastructure but also on governance standards, social values, and the level of participation of stakeholders in regions. Occupational safety governance is an essential interface between the economy and social values and is also essential in reinforcing regional resilience against systemic risks and crises. The wider comparative European literature also points to the fact that local government capacity and training systems, and employer-union cooperation are essential in reinforcing safety culture in regions.

2.2 Multi-Level Governance and the Role of Local Governments in Occupational Safety

The idea of multi-level governance is frequently used in public policy and safety research to characterize how intricate risks are handled through interaction among various levels of governance. Instead of depending on hierarchical and state-based regulation, this idea emphasizes vertical and horizontal interaction among public authorities, private actors, and civil society. In OSH, success is greatly dependent on the nature of interaction among public authorities in charge of regulation, enforcement, prevention, and response. Research is increasingly demonstrating that centralized frameworks of regulation are insufficient in ensuring uniform outcomes in occupational safety, particularly in socio-economically heterogeneous contexts. Although national legislation is vital in establishing OSH requirements, its success is greatly dependent on local interpretation and implementation. In addition, local differences in economic structures, size of enterprises, labor markets, and cultural settings contribute to inconsistent OSH performance in the context of a single country ([Hudzik, 2014](#); [Walters et al., 2018](#)).

The aforementioned limitations are also evident in the countries under analysis. In Germany, national OSH regulations are accompanied by local and regional governance mechanisms. These mechanisms are institutionalized in promoting local prevention, interaction, and stakeholder participation ([Aurich-Beerheide et al., 2015](#)). In contrast, in Serbia and Türkiye, OSH governance is highly centralized, with local authorities playing only auxiliary roles in OSH despite being in alignment with European OSH standards ([Isik, 2026](#)). This has led to an emphasis on intermediary bodies in ensuring OSH through appropriate local interpretation of European legislation. In multi-level governance structures, local authorities are increasingly being perceived as potential intermediaries due to their local nature. This is because of their proximity to local contexts, which can be used in responding to context-specific risks, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and interaction with stakeholders. This is supported by the findings of comparative evidence in Germany, which shows that local authorities could act as effective intermediaries in the OSH system through integrated

prevention and coordination mechanisms (Aurich-Beerheide et al., 2015). However, in Serbia and Türkiye, the involvement of the local authorities is low in the formal OSH system and prevention mechanisms (Dursun-Ozkanca & Crossley-Frolick, 2012).

Empirical research findings related to the involvement of the local governments in the occupational safety governance system are limited (Yi & Qiu, 2025). However, existing literature portrays the involvement of the local authorities in the occupational safety system, primarily through the implementation of the regulations (Kineber et al., 2023). This indicates that the capacity of the local authorities to engage in planning, resource allocation, and coordination with the stakeholders is not well analyzed. However, the occupational safety governance system is not limited to the implementation of the regulations; it is also related to planning, supervision, and crisis management, among others. Therefore, the capacity of the local governance system is low in Serbia and Türkiye. This indicates that the OSH system is primarily reactive, enforcement-based, and institutionally fragmented.

Moreover, the socio-economic disparities between the metropolitan and smaller cities in the country emphasize the significance of the capacity of the local governance system in the OSH system. This is because the metropolitan cities are likely to be more effective in the OSH system due to their technical and institutional capacity, whereas the smaller cities are likely to outsource the services, thus indicating the need to bridge the gap between the research findings and the policy. This is essential in the process of localizing the national OSH policy and bringing it in line with the European principles of good governance, and is possible through the involvement of the local authorities in the OSH system at the national level. This is supported by the findings of the comparative evidence, which show that occupational safety is embedded in the regional governance system through the involvement of the local authorities in the OSH system.

2.3 Local Governments as Underexplored Safety Actors

Despite their significant tasks in areas like public welfare, urban planning, emergency planning, infrastructure regulation, and service delivery, local governments have traditionally received scarce attention as actors in occupational safety governance. When incorporated into the safety science discourse, it is predominantly as supporting actors in areas like inspection support, emergency planning, and awareness promotion. Such a narrow view does not reflect the overall capacity and potential of local governments as actors in occupational safety governance (Almklov et al., 2014).

However, in contrast to this rather narrow view, there is evidence from various European contexts that supports the capacity and potential of local governments as actors in occupational safety governance. For instance, in Germany, local governments and regional authorities are recognized actors in occupational safety governance. Additionally, they are known to be supporting enforcement, coordination in preventive activities, training support for small and medium-sized businesses, and integration in regional development and labor market strategies. This indicates that, in practice, local governments can also function as actors in promoting safety culture, rather than only implementing centrally defined regulations (Kuhlmann et al., 2022). However, in countries like Serbia and Türkiye, the integration of local

governments in formal structures for OSH governance is rather weak. This is despite the fact that in both countries, there is significant alignment in national legislation with respect to European regulations. In both countries, it is also notable that local governments often operate with limited mandates, scarce information in terms of safety-related data, and insufficient resources in terms of preventive engagement. This means that in each of the countries, occupational safety governance is rather centralized and reactive, with scarce consideration for locally adapted approaches to prevention (Banjević & Gardašević, 2023; Isik, 2026).

The literature also supports the fact that local governments enjoy relational and spatial advantages, which enable them to function as an intermediary between the regulator, employer, worker, and civil society. Local governments' closeness to workplaces enables them to design prevention measures in line with local risk profiles. Evidence of the effectiveness of the participatory governance model, particularly in Scandinavian countries, confirms that local governments' intermediary roles are essential in developing trust, voluntary compliance, and collective responsibility for safety (Masuda et al., 2022). However, comparative research on local governments' capacity in occupational safety governance in various countries reveals that there are significant differences in local institutional capacity in various countries. For instance, financial, technical, autonomy, and maturity factors significantly affect local governments' capacities to engage in occupational safety governance. Local governments in Germany, for instance, possess the capacity to coordinate prevention measures, whereas financial and institutional limitations in Serbia and Türkiye hinder local governments' involvement in occupational safety, resulting in fragmented safety practices (Banjević & Gardašević, 2023).

The differences in local governments' capacities in occupational safety governance raise significant concerns about fairness and consistency in occupational safety systems in various countries. For instance, differences in local capacities may result in significant differences in safety outcomes in various countries, despite the adoption of identical occupational safety regulations, particularly in countries with significant differences in socio-economic profiles. Despite the implications of local governments' capacities in occupational safety governance, there is limited conceptual analysis of the local governments' roles in occupational safety governance. It is imperative to fill this gap, particularly in the comparative analyses of occupational safety governance in Serbia, Germany, and Türkiye, which demonstrate differences in the local governments' capacities for occupational safety governance. It is imperative to strengthen the analysis of the local governments' roles in occupational safety governance in order to improve the effectiveness of occupational safety governance in various countries.

2.4 Research Gap and Analytical Positioning of the Study

Despite an increased emphasis on governance aspects in OSH, local governments have not been adequately conceptualized in safety science literature. Existing studies have predominantly focused on the workplace-level aspects or national-level institutions. Therefore, the local governance dimension of occupational safety is still in an analytically embryonic state. This is unfortunate since it is crucial in explaining differences in occupational safety performance among regions that have similar national-level regulatory environments. For instance, empirical findings on occupational safety performance in European Union member

states and candidate countries have indicated significant differences in occupational safety performance among regions. This indicates that the differences in regulatory compliance cannot fully explain the differences in occupational safety outcomes. Without considering local-level institutions, occupational safety performance cannot be analyzed adequately (Bao et al., 2022; Rađenović, 2023).

For example, in Germany, local governments have been acting as institutionally embedded actors in multi-level occupational safety governance systems. Therefore, occupational safety is enhanced at the local level by providing preventive services, organizing stakeholders, and integrating occupational safety aspects into regional development strategies. Thus, the occupational safety standards set at the national level have been translated into local-level preventive strategies. However, in both Serbia and Türkiye, occupational safety governance is still formally centralized. Despite significant legal reforms in line with European standards, local governments in both countries have not been provided with clear mandates or access to occupational safety data. Therefore, in each country, the respective local government has been restricted to playing an indirect role in occupational safety.

Literature suggests that local governments hold a structurally strategic position in relation to regulation, service provision, regional development, and community engagement (Britton & Webb, 2024). Their proximity to workplaces and responsibilities in urban planning, infrastructural management, disaster preparedness, and social policy make them a potential intermediary that may help in the localization of national OSH standards. However, the role of safety science in exploring the influence of institutional capacities and limitations on occupational safety governance in different countries has not been explored.

This issue is more pertinent in countries that experience socio-economic and spatial disparities, such as Türkiye and Serbia. Variations in administrative resources, technical expertise, and organizational capacity contribute to uneven implementation of occupational safety policies, yet systematic analyses linking these differences to safety outcomes remain scarce.

To further increase the clarity and precision of concepts and analysis, this study is informed by the following research questions:

- (RQ1) What is the status and functional position of local governments in the occupational safety governance system?
- (RQ2) How far are local governments recognized, incorporated, or overlooked in national and international occupational health and safety systems?
- (RQ3) What structural, legal, and institutional factors are responsible for the marginalization of local governments in occupational safety governance?
- (RQ4) How can local governments be better incorporated into OSH governance systems for better effectiveness in prevention and policy implementation?

By attempting to address these questions, this paper will employ a multidisciplinary and comparative approach and will be informed by international standards and regulatory frameworks and theories of governance. The paper will not only aim to highlight and address the gaps in practice but also strive to develop an inclusive and functionally integrated model for occupational safety governance. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows:

The following part will discuss and develop the conceptual and theoretical framework for understanding and analyzing the governance system for occupational safety and the role and position of multi-level actors in it. This will be followed by a comparative and analytical part in which international OSH systems will be examined in terms of the incorporation and integration of local governments. The study will then be conducted in terms of the OSH system in Türkiye and will highlight and discuss the gaps in terms of integration and incorporation. Based on that, a model will be developed for repositioning and refunctioning local governments in OSH governance. The paper will conclude with recommendations and directions for further research.

The present study addresses this gap by adopting a governance-oriented perspective that conceptualizes local governments as active safety actors rather than peripheral implementers. Occupational safety is framed as a multi-dimensional governance system embedded within regional development, social welfare, and public administration. Using a comparative framework encompassing Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye, the study examines how different multi-level governance arrangements shape occupational safety outcomes. By doing so, the study contributes to the literature in three ways: it advances a governance-based conceptualization of occupational safety, empirically links local institutional capacity to safety outcomes, and offers context-sensitive insights for Türkiye and Serbia on localizing OSH policies in line with European Union principles of good governance. Overall, the study moves beyond compliance-centered approaches and highlights the institutional role of local governments in strengthening sustainable, resilient, and participatory occupational safety systems.

3 Method

3.1 Research Design and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design to examine the role of local governments in OSH governance. Given the institutional and governance-oriented nature of the research problem, a qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing how regulatory structures, institutional roles, and coordination mechanisms shape occupational safety systems across different national and regional contexts. Rather than focusing on accident statistics or firm-level performance indicators, the study seeks to understand how governance arrangements influence occupational safety outcomes at the local level. This approach is in line with both safety science and governance in public policy, which emphasize that occupational safety is not only an instrumental process but also that it is part of broader governance. This provides a foundation for an in-depth analysis of how capacity, decentralization, and local governance influence OSH.

The study is also informed by safety governance and multi-level governance theory. This theory is centered on the interactions among actors at different levels, namely national, regional, and local levels. From this approach, occupational safety is not only viewed at the workplace but also at an institutional level. Therefore, more emphasis is placed on governance than on quantitative aspects. This study is part of a comparative case study that involves three countries: Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. The selection of countries is informed by differences in governance systems, levels of decentralization, and the institutional placement

of local governments in OSH. Germany is used in this study as an example of European governance in which local and regional governments have been formally placed in OSH at the national level with effective coordination. Both Serbia and Türkiye represent countries with more centralized governance in which local governments have little or no role in OSH, despite being compliant with European legislation.

Methodologically, this comparative qualitative design aims to identify governance mechanisms rather than establish causal relationships or rank countries by safety performance. By examining how different institutional configurations enable or constrain local government involvement, the study generates analytically generalizable insights into the role of local authorities within multi-level OSH systems.

3.2 Data Sources and Analytical Process

Data collection relied exclusively on secondary qualitative sources, consistent with the study's governance-oriented analytical framework. A comprehensive documentary review was conducted to examine the institutional, legal, and policy dimensions of OSH governance at national and local levels. This approach facilitated the comparison of formal mandates, governance structures, and the role of local governments. The documents were chosen according to the following three criteria: relevance to legal and/or regulatory issues of occupational safety, institutional authority, and relevance to the governance structure with national and subnational actors. For each country under analysis, the primary sources were:

Türkiye: [Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331](#); [Occupational Health and Safety Risk Assessment Regulation \(2012\)](#); secondary legislation and implementation guidelines issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security.

Germany: [Occupational Safety and Health Act \(1996\)](#) (Arbeitsschutzgesetz); [Social Code Book VII \(1996\)](#) (SGB VII – statutory accident insurance); federal and Land-level ordinances and implementation rules and guidance; [Deutsche Gesetzliche Unfallversicherung \[DGUV\], 2013](#) regulations and institutional documents. (The German reference framework was chosen because of the unique federal/Länder structure of the German state and the relevance of this structure to the question of how the governance structure of occupational safety might be organized around the principles of strong national-level regulation and differentiated subnational-level implementation)

Serbia: [Law on Occupational Safety and Health \(2023\)](#); Strategy on Safety and Health at Work (2018; 2024); policy and reform documents regarding harmonization with EU legislation.

In addition to the above primary sources, various reports and documents issued by institutions and national-level strategy documents were used in the analysis. For the Turkish case, the analysis focused on the national legislation, most notably the [Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331](#), municipal, metropolitan laws and strategic policy documents issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security and selected municipalities. Reports published by the Union of Municipalities of Türkiye were also examined to capture local governance perspectives on OSH-related activities.

In the European cases, documentary analysis covered national OSH legislation and regulatory frameworks defining the role of local and regional authorities. Particular attention was

paid to the federal-Länder distribution of responsibilities in Germany in order to assess how multi-level governance arrangements shaped the institutional role of subnational actors in occupational safety and guidance issued by the sector-based accident insurance institutions (Berufsgenossenschaften), and regional policy reports addressing prevention and coordination mechanisms. The Serbian case was analyzed using national OSH legislation aligned with the European Union *acquis*, government policy documents, and publicly available reports on labor inspection and local administration, with particular attention to the formal integration of municipalities into OSH governance.

To ensure analytical consistency, supranational and comparative policy documents were also reviewed, including reports published by the European Commission, European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, and Eurofound. These sources provided comparative benchmarks and supported the assessment of alignment with European standards and principles of good governance.

All documents were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Texts were coded according to analytically derived themes informed by safety governance and multi-level governance literature.

The main themes involved local institutional capacity, formal OSH mandates, coordination of stakeholders, inspection and enforcement, training and awareness, and alignment with national and international OSH standards. This coding approach facilitated the systematic analysis of governance strengths, weaknesses, and gaps, and ensured comparability and sensitivity to variations between countries.

This data matrix, as presented in Table 1, reveals that the analysis draws on a range of comparable documentary sources for all three cases. The analysis of various sources of national legislation, local governance arrangements, policy strategies, local-level documentation, and supra-national benchmarks allows for a comprehensive analysis of both the form and content of local-level governance narratives on the role of local governments in occupational safety governance. Perhaps most importantly, this matrix also reveals differences in the structure of these governance arrangements. Although there are extensive and systematic documentation sources available for the local level in Germany, there are significant limitations in the availability of formal local-level documentation on OSH in Serbia and Türkiye. Such differences are significant from a substantive analytical perspective, as they reveal differences in the institutional integration of local governments in OSH, rather than limitations in the analytical approach.

Table 1. *Data Matrix: Countries × Types of Documentary Sources*

| Country | National OSH Legislation | Local Government Law/ Framework | National OSH Strategy & Policy Documents | Local/ Municipal Strategic Plans | Supranational/ EU Policy Documents | OSH Institutions & Advisory Bodies Reports |
|---------|--------------------------|---------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|
| Germany | Yes | Länder & municipal frameworks | Yes | selected regions/ municipalities | Yes | Berufsgenossenschaften, BAuA |
| Serbia | Yes | local administration law | Yes | limited | EU alignment documents | Labour Inspectorate reports |
| Türkiye | Law No. 6331 | Municipal & Metropolitan Laws | Yes | selected municipalities | EU-OSHA, EC | Ministry & Union of Municipalities |

3.3 Case Selection and Comparative Logic

The comparative analysis will concentrate on the cases of Germany and Serbia, along with Türkiye. The selection of cases was grounded in a purposive sampling approach, where cases were considered appropriate if they met the following criteria:

- The presence of well-established OSH regulatory frameworks;
- Diverse patterns of governance and decentralization levels;
- Evidence of the involvement of local or regional authorities, both in a formal or informal manner, in any type of activity related to OSH.

Germany was considered a well-established model of OSH governance in the European context, characterized by a corporatist and insurance-based coordination of statutory accident insurance bodies and federal and regional authorities. Serbia, as a post-socialist country and EU candidate, was considered a transitional governance context. Although it possesses an OSH legislative framework which is well-aligned with EU directives, local governments are not properly institutionalized when it comes to OSH governance, including a very narrow scope of competencies, very limited administrative capacity, and a highly centralized system of labor inspection. Therefore, Serbia appears as a very important intermediate case, as it is positioned between mature multi-level governance systems and highly centralized models. The case of Türkiye was considered a contrasting model, characterized by a highly centralized regulatory environment and an extremely low level of integration of local governments in OSH governance. Although a well-founded legislative environment for OSH exists, as shown by the [Occupational Health and Safety Law No. 6331](#), municipalities are active in OSH only through indirect roles and not as active players. The above-mentioned cases are appropriate for an explanatory comparative analysis, focusing on governance, and not for a generalizing comparative analysis. The fact that the study focuses on cases that are positioned along a continuum of decentralization, institutionalization, and local governments' involvement allows for the isolation of the effect of variations in governance and local governments' capacities concerning the role of municipalities in occupational safety management.

3.4 Methodological Rigor and Limitations

For methodological rigor in the comparative analysis of Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye, certain measures were undertaken. Methodological triangulation was secured by relying on multiple secondary data sources. This involved using national legislation, policy documents, municipal strategic plans, and international reports. Documentary analysis, comparative analysis, and thematic content analysis were used in examining the data. This approach provides greater internal validity since it enables cross-verification of governance patterns. Furthermore, using an explicit governance-oriented analytical framework provides greater transparency, analytical coherence, and reproducibility. However, certain limitations need to be recognized. To start with, the study is exclusively based on qualitative secondary data. Primary data in the form of interviews with municipal officials, inspectors, or social actors is not used. This is consistent with the study's institutional focus. However, it limits in-depth insights into actor perceptions.

Secondly, the study's focus is restricted to only three countries. It is not representative of all occupational safety systems in European countries. Thirdly, the study's focus is on governance institutions, coordination mechanisms, and governance capacity. It does not involve safety performance indicators. Therefore, it is not possible to make causal inferences on outcomes. However, this is consistent with the study's focus on governance. The methodological approach is consistent with the study's core objective of developing a governance-based approach to occupational safety. Comparing a highly institutionalized system with more centralized or transitional governance contexts provides strong insights into the structural conditions that enable local governments to function effectively in safety governance. As such, the methodology provides a solid foundation for theory development in safety science and for policy-oriented discussions on strengthening local governance capacity in occupational safety systems.

4 Results

4.1 Comparative Analysis of Local Government Competences and Their OSH Relevance

For a more precise comparative evaluation, it is also necessary to assess not only whether local governments have a formal presence in occupational safety governance but also what kinds of competencies they have in the selected jurisdictions. To that end, the study makes a distinction between regulatory authority, implementation support, coordination capacity, preventive service delivery, crisis interface, and data management.

In Türkiye, local governments have extremely limited formal competencies in the basic architecture of occupational health and safety governance. Regulatory authority, inspection, and enforcement powers remain highly centralized. Local governments may indirectly contribute to occupational safety governance in crisis situations with regard to emergency preparedness, in service delivery, in environmental health, in fire safety, and in some aspects of public health. However, even in these domains, there is no institutional integration into the OSH system in terms of governance. Therefore, in terms of structured presence in occupational safety governance, local governments in Türkiye have limited capacity when it comes to structured prevention, coordination, and risk governance.

In Germany, the presence of local and subnational competencies in occupational safety governance is visible in a more functionally differentiated federal-Länder system. While core occupational safety governance is maintained at the national level with a strong presence in legislation and strategic oversight, implementation is supported with a multi-level institutional arrangement involving Länder authorities, accident insurance institutions, and territorially organized administrative mechanisms. This is not an arrangement that provides unconditional freedom for local governments but rather a coordinated approach in which subnational levels also contribute to occupational safety governance in terms of guidance, implementation, training, prevention, and coordination. Such an arrangement seems to provide greater system response capacity without compromising system integration at the national level.

With regards to Serbia, it is noticeable that the pattern of governance is still in the process of transition, in which local competencies are still in their early stages of development

and are relatively weaker in comparison to other countries in the sample. However, the evolution of policies in Serbia also points to an increasing awareness of the importance of territorial coordination, which is in line with the results of the case studies and the overall pattern of governance in the other countries of the sample.

When it comes to the comparison of the results of the case studies, it is noticeable that the importance of local government competences is not related to their role in the regulation of OSH, but rather to their role in supporting the process of prevention, coordination, and preparation in the context of crisis management and crisis response. The results of the case studies also indicate that in those countries in which the role of subnational actors is more clearly defined in the context of OSH, there is also more potential for developing territorially sensitive interventions, supporting access to guidance for SMEs, and developing stronger connections between occupational safety, crisis management, and local risk environments. However, in those countries in which the role of subnational actors is not clearly defined in the context of OSH, there is also more potential for limitations in the early detection of risks, inter-institutional coordination, and the capacity of early and ongoing preventive engagement.

It is therefore noticeable that the relationship between local competences and OSH outcomes should be related to the broader concept of governance and not to simplistic notions of cause and effect. The results of the case studies do not support the simplistic assumption that more local authority is likely to lead to more effective OSH outcomes, but rather that more clearly defined and institutionally coordinated local competences can support the enabling factors of more responsive, preventive, and integrated OSH governance.

With regard to the results of the case studies in Table 2, it is noticeable that the importance of local government units in the context of OSH governance is not related to the level of decentralization in general, but rather to whether their competences are institutionally defined and coordinated with national oversight in the context of preventive and territorially responsive governance functions.

Table 2. *Comparative Competences of Local Government Units in Occupational Safety Governance*

| Analytical Dimension | Türkiye | Germany | Serbia | Governance Implications for OSH Outcomes |
|--|---|---|--|---|
| Regulatory authority | Highly centralized; local governments have no significant formal regulatory authority within the core OSH system. | Core regulation is nationally framed, but implementation is shaped within a federal-Länder structure. | Predominantly centralized, with limited local regulatory relevance. | Where local regulatory competences are absent, local adaptability depends on informal coordination rather than institutional mandate. |
| Inspection and enforcement role | Inspection and enforcement are concentrated at the central state level. Municipalities have no direct labor inspection authority. | Enforcement is institutionally differentiated across federal and Länder structures, supported by accident insurance bodies and administrative mechanisms. | Enforcement remains largely centralized, with weak local institutionalization. | Systems with territorially embedded enforcement-support structures may achieve better responsiveness and follow-up capacity. |

| Analytical Dimension | Türkiye | Germany | Serbia | Governance Implications for OSH Outcomes |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| Preventive support and training functions | Local contributions are indirect and fragmented; preventive support is not systematically embedded in municipal mandates. | Subnational and intermediary bodies contribute to prevention, training, guidance, and implementation support. | Emerging but still limited local support functions; preventive roles are not yet strongly institutionalized. | Stronger local preventive support can improve awareness, training access, and continuity of prevention, especially for SMEs. |
| SME-oriented guidance and service access | Limited structured local support for SMEs in OSH compliance and prevention. | More developed support environment through coordinated institutions and advisory mechanisms. | Partial and uneven; support capacity remains constrained. | SME-sensitive local support mechanisms may reduce compliance costs and improve access to expertise. |
| Crisis management and preparedness interface | Municipalities play a role in emergency management, but this is weakly integrated with OSH governance. | Better potential for coordination between occupational safety, emergency structures, and territorially differentiated administrative systems. | Transitional and uneven integration; preparedness functions remain underdeveloped in OSH terms. | Integration between OSH and crisis governance may enhance preparedness, resilience, and coordinated local response capacity. |
| Data use and regional risk mapping | OSH data systems are mainly centralized; local risk-based planning capacity is limited. | Greater potential for territorially differentiated implementation and data-informed coordination across governance levels. | Limited local data capacity and weak regionalized risk intelligence. | Regional risk mapping and local data use can strengthen targeted prevention and context-sensitive interventions. |
| Stakeholder coordination capacity | Local multi-actor coordination in OSH is weak and not systematically institutionalized. | A more mature coordination environment through multi-level governance and intermediary institutions. | Coordination mechanisms exist in limited form, but remain institutionally fragile. | Institutionalized local coordination can improve learning, participation, and sustained preventive engagement. |
| Institutional clarity of local roles | Local roles are indirect, fragmented, and not clearly codified within the OSH architecture. | Subnational functions are more clearly embedded in the governance structure, although not based on unrestricted local autonomy. | Local roles remain transitional and only partially defined. | Greater clarity of local competencies supports accountability, continuity, and more coherent governance design. |
| Overall position of local governments in OSH governance | Peripheral and supportive at best; largely outside the formal OSH governance core. | Complementary and operationally relevant within a strong, nationally supervised multi-level system. | Transitional and weakly institutionalized, with reform potential. | OSH performance is likely to benefit where local roles are defined as coordinated complements to national oversight, rather than as isolated actors. |

Note: The table does not imply a causal link between local competences and occupational safety performance. Instead, it highlights the governance conditions that enable local institutional roles to build up prevention capabilities, coordination quality, preparedness, and context sensitivity.

4.2 Institutional Positioning of Local Governments in Occupational Safety Systems

The comparative analysis shows that local governments occupy a structurally important but unevenly defined position within the OSH systems in Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. In all cases, local governments are heavily involved in the areas of policy that directly influence occupational safety, such as urban planning, licensing, infrastructure, emergency management, environmental protection, and local service delivery. Nonetheless, the extent to which such areas are formally articulated in explicit OSH governance structures varies significantly, depending on the specificities of the institutional design of each country. In the case of Germany, local and regional authorities are integrated into a corporatist insurance-based OSH system in which local governments function primarily as facilitators or coordinators. Through cooperation with the *Berufsgenossenschaften*, labour inspectorates, and social partners, local authorities can support the development of preventive measures, regional OSH communications, and the promotion of OSH in local economic development and spatial planning. The case of Serbia represents an intermediate scenario in which OSH governance is still largely centralized, with local governments having started to assume supportive roles in local safety promotion, emergency preparedness, and inspection coordination, partly as a result of the alignment process with the European Union. In the case of Türkiye, local governments are still peripherally integrated in the OSH governance structures. Despite their wide-ranging responsibilities in local service delivery, disaster management, and local development, local governments are not formally integrated into the OSH governance framework. Their participation in OSH is therefore indirect, fragmented, and primarily limited to areas such as licensing, infrastructure control, or emergency response.

4.3 Local Institutional Capacity and Preventive Safety Functions

The second key finding concerns the relationship between municipal institutional capacities and preventive OSH functions, with cross-national differences being evident in Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. In the European Union case of Germany, for example, local authorities with specialized OSH units, secure sources of finance, and access to safety data are in a position to engage in prevention-oriented governance. In these contexts, local authorities complement an insurance-based system with support for localized training initiatives, dissemination of sector-specific advice, and access to advisory services. These are particularly important in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) without in-house OSH capacities. This preventive role of local authorities in OSH governance shifts attention away from reactive inspection-based models and towards anticipatory management. In Serbia, local authorities are found to have an intermediate role in OSH governance. Although local authorities have weak formal mandates in OSH prevention, emerging practices in OSH governance's harmonization with EU requirements are evident. These include local authority-based awareness-raising activities, cooperation with labor inspectorates, and project-based training initiatives. However, these are uneven and dependent upon external sources of finance, with limited technical and financial capacities. In contrast, in Türkiye, local authorities are found to have

weak institutional capacities in OSH governance. In these contexts, local authorities are found to have limited capacities in terms of specialized OSH personnel, safety data mechanisms, and dedicated budgets for OSH prevention. Furthermore, local authority engagement is largely restricted to downstream activities such as response, licensing, and public information. The evidence in these cases suggests that municipal institutional capacities are a key enabling factor in OSH governance. In contexts with strong capacities, local authority engagement in OSH governance is evident in effective preventive functions. In contrast, where capacities are weak, local authority engagement in OSH governance is largely reactive, limited in scope, and uneven in effectiveness.

4.4 Stakeholder Collaboration and Participation as a Governance Condition

The results clearly reveal that the quality of regional OSH governance in these regional communities is closely linked to the presence of structured multi-actor collaboration. Differences in this respect are clearly evident across Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. The quality of OSH systems is found to be most robust in the communities where regional governments are institutionally empowered to bring together employers and employees and their representatives, trade unions, civil society organizations, and knowledge institutions within regular and formally recognized coordination platforms. In the European Union country studied, namely Germany, multi-actor collaboration is recognized and functions as an institutionalized governance practice. Municipal and regional governments facilitate coordination among employers' organizations, trade unions, accident insurance institutions, and labour inspectorates. This enables the continuous exchange of information, the joint prioritization of risks and the development of common ownership for prevention activities. In these countries, the presence of participation is recognized and functions as one of the most important features of the OSH system. In Serbia, the presence of coordination platforms is low. However, emerging collaboration practices in the context of EU approximation are clearly evident in regional communities. Municipalities cooperate with labour inspectorates, chambers of commerce, trade unions, and donor organizations in the implementation of training and awareness activities. In Türkiye, the presence of participation at the local level is less evident. The quality of coordination is mostly based on informal networking and project-based and/or centrally driven campaigns rather than permanent coordination platforms. In the presence of collaboration in these countries, the quality of collaboration is mostly focused on administrative compliance and/or post-incident response rather than long-term prevention.

4.5 Local Governments as Intermediaries Between Regulation and Practice

The fourth key finding concerns the intermediary role of local governments as the bridge between formal OSH regulation and workplace practice, with cross-national variations between Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. In the European Union cases, local governments and regional authorities are governance intermediaries in the process of translating national

OSH regulations into sector-specific guidance that is sensitive to the size of enterprises and socio-economic conditions. In the case of Germany, the intermediary role is embedded in the corporatist system of municipal cooperation with the *Berufsgenossenschaften*, the chambers of commerce, and social partners. Local governments provide access to sector-specific guidance, coordinate preventive initiatives, and support enterprises, especially SMEs, in coping with the complex rules and regulations. The intermediary role is particularly relevant in the case of SMEs, which are unable to deal with the complex OSH regulations. Local governments provide accessible support to enterprises, which leads to reduced uncertainty about regulations and increased voluntary compliance. From the perspective of governance, the OSH system is no longer limited to the enforcement of regulations but has shifted to the concept of shared responsibility and preventive learning. The case of Serbia is intermediate in the context of the intermediary role of local governments. Local governments occasionally perform intermediary functions, especially through EU-funded projects or cooperation with the labor inspectorates. However, the performance is episodic and not well institutionalized. As a consequence, access to sector-specific guidance is limited and varies significantly between the regions. In the case of Türkiye, the intermediary role of local governments is limited. OSH regulations are transmitted through centralized channels with limited interpretation and adaptation at the local level. Local governments do not perform the intermediary role of translating OSH regulations into practice. As a consequence, compliance is perceived as an external obligation rather than a part of the organizational process, which leads to uneven safety performance, especially in the case of SME-dominated regions.

4.6 Data Infrastructure and Digital Enablement in Local OSH Governance

The analysis suggests that data availability and digital infrastructure are important enabling factors for the development of prevention-oriented local OSH governance in Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. However, there are marked differences between these countries. The EU countries benefit from the application of safety-related data and information, including standardized reporting of incidents and regional risk mapping. This helps regional and local authorities to strategically plan and monitor the implementation of prevention activities. In Germany, digital reporting systems operated by the *Berufsgenossenschaften* provide in-depth data that indirectly help municipalities in the development and implementation of evidence-based prevention campaigns. In Serbia, the country is in a transitional phase. The country's labor inspectorates have access to centralized databases containing data on accidents and inspections. However, the availability of data at the local level is low. The digital infrastructure at the local level is also lacking. The data-sharing process between the country and the local level is in the initial stages. In Türkiye, the availability and application of data at the local level are low. The country's institutions collect vast data on OSH. However, these data are collected centrally and are not made available at the local level. The absence of digital infrastructure at the local level hinders the development of prevention activities.

4.7 Regional Disparities and Uneven Safety Governance Outcomes

The results show that there are significant regional differences in OSH governance in Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. In all cases, differences in the structure of the economy, density of industry, labor force, and institutional capabilities affect the way in which OSH are governed. However, the European system of governance appears to have a greater potential for compensating for these differences through region-specific interventions, coordinated resource allocation, and institutionalization of prevention. In the German system, existing differences between the more and less structurally developed regions are compensated for by the insurance-based system of OSH and the prevention networks. The combination of nationwide standards and regional adaptation allows for targeted prevention in regions and sectors where risks are especially high, so that the impact of economic disadvantages on OSH governance is minimized. Serbian OSH governance shows significant regional unevenness, especially between larger urban centers and economically less developed regions. Although the OSH legislation is applied uniformly, differences in local administrative capabilities are significant. The lack of a well-developed system of decentralization and resource availability means that regional differences are only compensated for to a certain extent, and there are significant differences in the engagement of regional authorities in prevention and the reliance on centralized control. OSH governance in Türkiye shows significant regional differences, but these are not compensated for to the same extent as in the European system. In economically more developed regions, municipalities have a higher administrative capacity and a denser network of institutions, ensuring active engagement in OSH even in the absence of specific mandates. In less developed regions, existing structural limitations, such as financial constraints, a lack of specialized staff, and a less developed network of stakeholders, mean that the OSH engagement is confined to reactive roles.

4.8 Summary of Key Findings

The findings illustrate that local governments represent an important but not well-integrated part of the OSH governance, with cross-national differences evident in Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye. The cross-national comparison reveals that the degree to which local governments are institutionally recognized, resourced, and coordinated in the national OSH systems is significant in determining the effectiveness, fairness, and durability of the occupational safety governance.

Table 3 presents a comparative synthesis of the local-level OSH governance in Germany, Serbia and Türkiye. The analytical themes emerged inductively from the safety governance and multi-level governance literature and were applied deductively in the document analysis process. The European case represents established models of OSH governance with different institutional logics, while Serbia and Türkiye exemplify transitional and centralized models of OSH governance, respectively. The categories reflect the dominant patterns of institutionalization in official legislation, policy documents, strategic plans, and reports, rather than exhaustive national practices or quantitative performance indicators. The table is based on a comparative qualitative analytical method based on document-based evidence.

The data sources include national OSH laws and regulations, secondary legislative instruments, policy documents, local government documents, and publications of European and International OSH institutions and organizations. The documents of each country have been systematically analyzed using thematic content analysis, focusing on the role of institutions, preventive capacity, coordination mechanisms, stakeholder involvement, data infrastructure, and differentiation. The themes emerged from the document analysis of the safety governance and multi-level governance literature and were refined during the iterative coding process. Each country is analyzed in relation to each of the themes, and dominant patterns of the respective local-level OSH governance are revealed. The European countries are grouped analytically based on their structural characteristics, while Serbia and Türkiye are treated as analytically distinct cases based on their differences in institutional maturity, decentralization, and local government integration. It is noteworthy that the table is not based on ranking the countries or quantitative measures of safety performance, but is rather used as a conceptual mapping tool to illustrate the relationship between different models of governance and their effects on the role of municipalities in the broader context of OSH systems. This methodological approach is more likely to yield more generalizable results in terms of governance mechanisms that could be transferred to other contexts and are more likely to be applicable in the realm of OSH governance.

Table 3. *Comparative Analytical Themes in the Local-Level OSH Governance*

| Analytical Theme | European Core Case (Germany) | Serbia (Transitional/Hybrid Model) | Türkiye (Centralized Model) |
|--|--|--|--|
| Institutional positioning of local governments | Local governments are formally recognized as complementary OSH actors; roles embedded in national frameworks and coordination structures | Partial recognition of local authorities; roles emerging but weakly institutionalized | Local governments positioned peripherally; OSH roles largely indirect and ad hoc |
| Preventive capacity | Strong municipal/regional support for prevention (training, advisory services, psychosocial risk initiatives) | Limited but growing preventive capacity; often project-based or externally supported | Prevention capacity limited; focus predominantly on downstream and reactive functions |
| Stakeholder collaboration | Institutionalized multi-actor platforms involving employers, unions, municipalities, and OSH bodies | Stakeholder collaboration present but uneven and often dependent on donor or EU-alignment projects | Collaboration uneven; frequently informal, episodic, and compliance-oriented |
| Coordination mechanisms | Structured vertical and horizontal coordination across governance levels | Hybrid coordination: formal vertical links with limited horizontal integration | Predominantly vertical coordination; horizontal coordination remains weak |
| Brokerage (intermediary) function | Strong translation of national standards into locally adapted guidance, especially for SMEs | Partial brokerage role; local adaptation constrained by capacity and authority | Weak brokerage role; compliance largely perceived as formal obligation |
| Data and digital enablement | Systematic use of OSH data, risk mapping, and digital monitoring to support prevention | Fragmented data practices; limited local-level integration | Local data practices less standardized; limited integration into municipal OSH functions |
| Regional disparities | Disparities mitigated through coordinated resource allocation and regional mechanisms | Regional disparities evident; mitigation mechanisms underdeveloped | Disparities pronounced and weakly addressed; strong dependence on regional capacity |

5 Discussion

5.1 Local Governments as Consequential—but Under-Theorized—Safety Actors

An important finding of this research is that local governments are more significant actors in OSH than they are generally recognized to be. Comparative analysis confirms that, in the cases where local governments are formally integrated into OSH governance structures, there is a significant shift from an enforcement-oriented to a prevention-oriented approach to governance. This is most clearly evident in the case of Germany, in which local governments are integrated into a corporatist insurance-based system, acting as facilitators and coordinators. The case of Serbia represents an intermediate case, in which local governments are involved in some safety-related activities, including emergency response, but in which their role in prevention is poorly institutionalized, primarily in the form of projects. The case of Türkiye represents a situation in which local governments are generally outside of OSH governance structures, with their role limited to indirect activities such as emergency response, licensing, or infrastructure management. It is worth noting that the experience of the EU does not support the substitution of local oversight with national oversight, but rather supports the view that complementarity, with local governments acting as the key nodes in the system, enhances the overall capacity for implementation.

5.2 Local Capacity, Prevention, and Equity

The findings also further specify municipal institutional capacity as a key factor in determining prevention-oriented OSH governance. For European countries, local institutions with in-house expertise, financial stability, and access to relevant safety data have greater potential in supporting localized prevention efforts, especially for SMEs. For Germany, governance mechanisms have been effective in reducing prevention costs for SMEs and addressing structural inequalities in protecting workers. Serbia is again placed in a transitional category, where uneven local prevention capacities are hindered by scarce resources and mechanisms for institutional learning. For Türkiye, local OSH capacities in municipalities have been generally low, with most local institutions lacking access to relevant data, prevention budgets, and/or specialized staff. From the governance point of view, there is an underlying equity concern with regard to SMEs and/or workers in high-risk sectors.

5.3 Coordination and Brokerage as Governance Mechanisms

Another implication is related to coordination and brokerage roles. The European examples show that coordination platforms, which integrate municipalities, inspectorates, social partners, and knowledge institutions, play a crucial role in ensuring coherent and adaptive safety governance. Such platforms facilitate the sharing of situation awareness, joint prioritization of risks, and learning processes. In Serbia, coordination is present, but in a disintegrated form, while in Türkiye, the interaction is mainly vertical and compliance-driven.

Related to these issues is the role of local governments as brokerage institutions between regulation and practice. The more local governments are capable of translating national OSH regulations into locally adapted guidance, the lower the level of uncertainty and the higher the level of voluntary compliance. The brokerage role of local governments is still in its infancy in Türkiye and to some extent in Serbia.

5.4 Interpreting Centralized Contexts

Most importantly, it is critical to note that the limited role of local governments in Türkiye is not an issue of local governance failure but, rather, an issue of the governance design. A similar, though less pronounced, trend is also evident in Serbia. In contrast, the European cases provide an indication of how local governments can be effective safety intermediaries without undermining national authority through role definition and institutionalized coordination. In conclusion, this study contributes to safety science by demonstrating that local governments are an important institutional site through which regulatory intent, organizational capacity, and community-level risk environments intersect. In addition, it is evident that enhancing local governance capacities represents an important strategic option for promoting prevention, equity, and resilience in multi-level occupational safety systems.

6 Conclusion

This study investigates OSH governance from the perspective of local governments and reveals that OSH outcomes are not only influenced by national-level laws and work-site-level interventions, but also by the role and capabilities of municipalities as part of a multi-level governance structure. Comparative evidence from Germany, Serbia, and Türkiye shows that local authorities constitute a structurally significant layer of OSH governance.

The purpose of this study was to explore the position of local governments in the context of occupational safety governance by comparatively investigating the ways in which different governance systems allocate responsibilities across levels of governance. The results reveal that, despite the direct proximity and relevance of local governments to workplaces and communities and the unique risk environment in each territory, they remain structurally marginal in the most prominent forms of OSH governance. The comparative evidence also reveals that this marginal position is neither uniform nor inherent in the way in which OSH governance is organized. In some systems, the highly centralized and state-centric approach is maintained, whereas in other systems, there is evidence of the functional involvement of local or regional actors in coordination, guidance, preparedness, and preventive support. More specifically, the study reveals that the most prominent forms of occupational safety governance remain organized around highly centralized legal and administrative frameworks in which the most important functions of the system, such as the exercise of regulatory authority and the power of enforcement and standard setting, remain concentrated at the national level. Furthermore, when evidence of functional involvement of local actors in OSH governance is revealed, it is most likely to be in a highly fragmented and indirectly supportive, rather than in an integrally and institutionally embedded way. The most functional forms of

OSH governance are likely to be those in which the capabilities of the local and regional levels are linked with the capabilities of the national level.

The above results indicate that the underrepresentation of the role of local governments in the OSH governance system is not just a question of legislative omission. Rather, it is an indication of the overall limitation of the governance system. The lack of clearly articulated roles for municipal actors, horizontal and vertical coordination, data sharing, and the integration of occupational safety with local risk management and crisis preparedness all contribute to the overall limitation of the OSH system in terms of flexibility and prevention depth. The limitation of the OSH system is most evident in sectors and regions with high industrial concentration of enterprises, dominance of SMEs, localized patterns of vulnerability, and multi-dimensional risk exposure. In this respect, the research contributes to the conceptual debate on the role of the local government in the OSH system. The research argues that the role of the local government should be recognized in the OSH system in such a way that it can contribute to the enhancement of the prevention depth and flexibility of the OSH system. The question is not whether the OSH system should be decentralized in general and in undifferentiated terms; it is rather that of how the role of the local government in the OSH system can be incorporated in such a way that the strategic overall coherence of the national OSH regulation is maintained.

The comparative analysis indicates that the overall capability of the OSH system in supporting the prevention and coordination functions in the sector and the region under consideration is not determined by the presence or absence of the role of the local government in the OSH system. Rather, it is determined by the overall scope and clarity of the competences of the local government in the OSH system.

The European experience demonstrates that with the formal integration of local authorities in their role as complementary governance actors, OSH systems become more preventive, adaptable, and resilient. In Germany, local integration reinforces national oversight through the integration of regulatory intent with local socio-economic contexts and networks. In contrast, Serbia's experience represents an intermediate case with partial and uneven institutionalization of local mandates, which limits local preventive capabilities despite alignment with European OSH governance. In Türkiye, findings indicate a structural gap in OSH governance between the national-level regulation and the local-level disparities in safety performance. Centralized regulation of OSH is insufficient to ensure consistency in prevention across diverse regional and local contexts, particularly in SMEs and high-risk industries.

In addition to its country-specific contributions, this research contributes to safety science by developing a governance-based understanding of OSH and reasserting local governments' role in OSH governance. Findings reinforce the understanding of OSH governance's role in shaping local-level occupational safety performance, which is contingent upon institutional design in local-level mandates, coordination, and enabling resources. Future research should expand upon these findings through primary empirical research, mixed-method research linking governance with safety outcomes, and longitudinal evaluations of governance reforms.

Consistent with the findings in European cases, recommendations for OSH governance in Türkiye should not be construed as a call for local-level governance in its own right, but rather as an argument for local-level institutional complements to strong national oversight.

Local and regional authorities can contribute meaningfully to OSH governance in contexts such as those in Europe, with clearly defined roles, strong coordination support, and activities consistent with national standards and enforcement.

Accordingly, the study points toward a staged, governance-oriented reform approach for Türkiye, centered on clarifying municipal OSH responsibilities, developing regional coordination capacities, strengthening the interface between OSH and crisis management, expanding preventive support for SMEs, improving risk-based data use, and institutionalizing stakeholder participation. Psychosocial risk governance, worker participation, proportionate incentives for management systems, and central–local funding arrangements should likewise be treated as complementary elements of a more adaptive and territorially responsive OSH structure. In this process, university–municipality–industry collaboration may also serve as an important platform for training, pilot interventions, and evidence-based policy learning.

Overall, the study concludes that the governance gap surrounding local actors in occupational safety cannot be addressed solely through regulatory expansion. What is needed is a structured model of vertical coordination, institutional clarity, and territorially grounded preventive capacity in which local governments operate as supportive and enabling actors under robust national oversight. Future research should build on these findings through empirical studies that test the measurable effects of local government involvement on prevention performance, compliance quality, institutional learning, and occupational safety outcomes across different national and regional contexts.

Data availability statement

All data used in the analysis were obtained from publicly available peer-reviewed journal articles. The bibliographic dataset supporting the findings of this study is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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