Empirical Legitimation Analysis in International Relations: How to Learn from the Insights – and Avoid the Mistakes – of Research in EU Studies

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Work in progress, comments welcome!

Abstract: The European Union (EU) represents a particularly advanced example of global governance. Given its encompassing policy competencies and influential supranational institutions, as well as the growing impact of EU decisions on the citizens, it is unsurprising that the political legitimation (or de-legitimation) of EU governance has been the object of much empirical research. This paper argues that this EU-related research holds lessons that can inform debates about the legitimation of global governance more generally. After some conceptual clarifications, the paper presents a critical review of the literature on the EU’s legitimation, focusing on five crucial aspects – the analysis of legitimation change over time, the arenas where legitimation occurs, the difference between various objects of legitimation, the interplay of top-down and bottom-up legitimation processes, as well as the relationship between legitimation and polity development. In each of these respects, the paper identifies important insights that can be gained from EU Studies, but also conceptual and methodological weaknesses in the EU-related literature that researchers working on other aspects of global governance should avoid. The paper closes by formulating a set of general desiderata for empirical legitimation research in International Relations.
Introduction

In the past two decades, scholarly interest in the analysis of legitimacy has grown markedly in International Relations (IR). This development is usually attributed to the growing authority of global governance institutions, which implies that the state – the traditional focal point for assessments of legitimacy – is no longer the only political unit perceived as being in need of explicit legitimation (Hurrelmann, Schneider and Steffek 2007; Bernstein and Coleman 2009; Nullmeier et al. 2010). While some of the resulting scholarly work has concentrated on the normative evaluation of global governance (Coicaud and Heiskanen 2001; Buchanan and Keohane 2006), the increased interest in legitimacy among IR scholars has also resulted in a number of studies that approach legitimation processes from an empirical perspective, examining for instance the emergence of new justificatory principles (Clark 2007), the self-legitimation of global governance institutions and the ways in which it is contested (Steffek 2003; Zaum 2013), or the politicization of world politics in the population, including the resulting legitimation debates (Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2013; Zürn and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2013; Zürn 2014).

This paper seeks to make an outsider’s contribution to this latter, empirical strand of the debate about legitimacy in IR, coming from a scholar whose work does primarily deal with international issues, but rather with Comparative Politics. My starting point is the observation that, in the IR discourse on legitimacy, frequent reference is made to the example of the European Union (EU), which constitutes the main focus of my own research. This is unsurprising given the EU’s comprehensive scope of policy competencies and extraordinarily high level of supranational institutionalization, which make it a poster-child for academic discussions about the internationalization of political power. In other words, the increase in international authority that is usually credited with triggering the “legitimacy turn” in IR has
proceeded unusually far in the EU context, which means that the EU can be interpreted as something like a forerunner for developments that might occur, over time, on other contexts of global governance as well. This makes it interesting for IR scholars to take a close look at the extensive empirical work on legitimation that has been done in EU Studies.

In this paper, I want to give a critical overview of this work, pointing to some of the insights that have been gained for the empirical analysis of legitimacy more broadly, but also to some of the problems that have hampered the scholarly quality of EU-related legitimation research, and that researchers working on other aspects of global governance might wish to avoid. After some conceptual clarifications, the paper will highlight five critical aspects of empirical legitimation research – the analysis of change over time, the differentiation of various legitimation arenas, the differentiation between various legitimation objects, the interplay of top-down and bottom-up legitimation processes, and the relationship between legitimation and polity development – in which EU-related academic work holds valuable lessons for global governance more broadly. The paper closes by formulating a set of desiderata for empirical research that applies to the study of legitimation both in the EU and elsewhere.

**Legitimacy and legitimation: Some conceptual clarifications**

At its most basic, the idea of legitimacy refers to the rightfulness of political authority.¹ Legitimacy, in this sense, is by definition a normative concept. The legitimacy of political systems and institutions, rulers and governance arrangements, or individual laws and policies is evaluated – affirmed or denied – on the basis of specific criteria. These criteria may of course vary, but the fact that legitimacy evaluations are underpinned by the idea of

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¹ This section draws on Hurrelmann, Schneider and Steffek (2007, 3-9).
rightful authority means that they represent validity claims of a generalizable character. This distinguishes legitimacy from concepts such as support, stability, or compliance, all of which may also be grounded in habitual obedience, fear of sanctions, or instrumental cost-benefit calculations (Pakulski 1986; Barker 1990, 20-44).

The distinction that this paper, along with much of the literature, makes between normative and empirical approaches to legitimacy research is not meant to deny this inescapable normativity of legitimacy. Instead, it points to the fact that social scientists can be both authors and observers of legitimacy evaluations (Barker 2001, 1-29; Hurrelmann, Schneider and Steffek 2007, 3-8). In the first case, they perform these legitimacy evaluations themselves, based on criteria of acceptability that they consider appropriate and the application of these criteria to existing or imagined political systems. This approach results in statements of a normative kind. In the second case, by contrast, social scientists examine the legitimacy evaluations performed by other actors – for instance, political elites or citizens. This approach results in statements of an empirical kind, which describe, for instance, certain institutions as being more or less widely accepted or certain legitimacy claims as being used more or less frequently.

This paper, as indicated above, is interested only in the second, empirical approach to researching legitimacy. In applying this approach, it makes a distinction between legitimacy as an attribute of governance arrangements and legitimation as the process in which legitimacy is claimed/disputed or affirmed/withdrawn (Barker 2001, 1-29). As Rodney Barker has pointed out, only the latter, legitimation, is directly accessible to empirical research: “‘[L]egitimacy’ does not exist as a feasible subject of empirical or historical inquiry, in the same sense that God does not exist as a possible subject for social scientific study. We need to speak of both legitimacy and
God when describing the actions of people engaged in politics and religion, but when we do so, we are describing their actions and language, not any independent phenomenon’ (Ibid., 26). In other words, all that can be empirically observed are processes of legitimation (including, of course, the possibility of de-legitimation), but in their analysis, we can draw inferences on the (empirical) legitimacy of the political systems or institutions to which these processes relate.

The last concept that is relevant to our analysis is that of politicization. Politicization refers to the extent to which a political system or its constitutive components become politically salient and/or controversial for a given group of actors (Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2013; Zürn 2014). Politicization is thus a discursive phenomenon: An object (institution, policy, etc.) is politicized if and when it is raised by political actors as a relevant topic of – or factor in – the process of collective decision making (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013b). The conceptual relationship between politicization and legitimacy is not always clearly specified by authors using the concept. In the context of empirical discussions about legitimacy and legitimation, it seems most appropriate to consider politicization a necessary – but not sufficient – condition of legitimation: A political system or one of its institutions or policies can be politically salient or controversial without being explicitly evaluated as legitimate or illegitimate. On the other hand, if evaluations of legitimacy take place, these necessarily imply politicization. A political system that is not politicized cannot sensibly be described as legitimate or illegitimate, rather it is simply “a- legitimate” (Steffek 2007, 190).

Based on these conceptual clarifications, the following sections of the paper will examine five central aspects of empirical legitimacy research, in each case highlighting the contributions but also the conceptual and/or empirical weaknesses of EU-related research, so that lessons can be drawn for studies on the empirical legitimacy of other global governance institutions.
How does legitimation change over time? The “permissive consensus” and its abuses

Empirical research on the EU’s legitimacy can be dated back at least to the early 1970s, but it exploded in the 1990s, after the rejection of the Maastricht Treaty in the Danish referendum of 1991. Since then, the most important story told by the majority of contributions is one of seminal trend: from non-politicization – and hence a-legitimacy – to increasingly more intensive politicization, including explicit challenges to the EU’s legitimacy. “[In] the first three decades of integration”, write Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks in one of the most widely cited recent contributions to the debate, “the creation of a European legal system was driven by the demand for adjudication of economic disputes between firms. The implications for most people (except perhaps farmers) were limited or not transparent. Public opinion was quiescent. These were the years of permissive consensus, of deals cut by insulated elites. The period since 1991 might be described, by contrast, as one of constraining dissensus. Elites, that is, party leaders in positions of authority, must look over their shoulders when negotiating European issues. What they see does not reassure them” (Hooghe and Marks 2009, 5; emphasis in original).

Hooghe and Marks cite a long list of empirical studies to show that, indeed, European integration is now contested in member-states public discourse, and does resonate in public opinion (Ibid., 6-18). These findings have been emphatically affirmed by other authors, based on the secondary analysis of existing research (de Wilde and Zürn 2012) or on original case studies of recent episodes in EU politics (Statham and Trenz 2013). As far as the description of current realities is concerned, there are few reasons do doubt the accuracy of this research. Regarding the analysis of legitimation change over time, however, it nevertheless remains unsatisfactory. The reason is that the majority of studies tend to compare the EU’s current state of contested
legitimacy, for which empirical evidence is collected, with a constructed reference point that is not itself empirically validated: the “permissive consensus” of the early integration years.

The concept of “permissive consensus” was introduced to European integration research in the early 1970s by Leon Lindberg and Stuart Scheingold. However, Lindberg and Scheingold did not develop a systematic definition; rather they referred to the concept in a metaphorical fashion to describe a situation in which European integration is not in danger of being faced with widespread and focused popular opposition (Lindberg and Scheingold 1970, 41). The European population, they argued, does not take much interest in the politics of European integration, but supports the broad goals of the unification project, and treats European institutions as “an accepted part of the political landscape” (Ibid., 62). Whether such a situation is adequately described as a “consensus” is questionable, but this is not an issue that must concern us here. What mattered for Lindberg and Scheingold is that the mixture of a lack of detailed interest in European integration and generally positive inclinations towards it works as a “permissive” instrument for the functioning and further development of European institutions. It “provides relative assurance that the goals of the Community are widely shared and that normal operations of the community system will be accepted as authoritative and legitimate. And if these goals and these normal operations conduce to the progressive growth of the system, this too is likely to meet with general acceptance” (Ibid., 121).

The ways in which the “permissive consensus” concept is used in recent discussions of the EU’s legitimacy – for instance in the passage by Hooghe and Marks cited above – suggests that European integration before the early 1990s was virtually uncontested. But empirical evidence for this assertion is seldom provided. A few studies that take a broader historical perspective suggest that this view is inadequate. Claudia Schrag Sternberg (2013), for instance,
in an impressive qualitative analysis of political and media discourses, shows that the history of discursive legitimation and de-legitimation of European integration can be traced back until at least the 1950s. Her analysis does not disprove the hypothesis of increasing political contestation about the EU’s legitimacy, but it does show that the historical continuities in EU-related legitimation debates are as striking as the discontinuities. Studies that have used methods of quantitative discourse analysis to track politicization or legitimation processes over time (e.g., Green-Pedersen 2012; Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013a; Hutter and Grande 2014) invite similar conclusions. While they do generally show longer-term trends of increasing political contestation, they also reveal that this trend does not start from a situation of complete “a-legitimacy”, that it does not unfold evenly over time, and that developments in various member states sometimes differ quite dramatically. Changes in the EU’s empirical legitimation, therefore, should not be conceptualized as an unambiguous and unidirectional trend “from permissive consensus to constraining dissensus”; rather they are better approached as a development that proceeds in fits and starts, including slowdowns and outright reversals, and therefore must be studied using carefully conceptualized longitudinal research designs.

Where does legitimation occur? Unpacking the “public sphere”

The definitions of legitimacy and legitimation developed above imply that the construction or deconstruction of legitimacy is a multifaceted phenomenon that involves multiple actors and consists of a variety of activities. Researchers in EU Studies have applied a large array of research approaches and methodological instruments to track evidence of legitimation (or politicization as its necessary condition). These include studies of political discourse such as government communication (Crespy and Schmidt 2013), parliamentary debates (Wendler 2014),
party manifestos and positions (Benoit and Laver 2006; Hutter and Grande 2014), and media reporting (Statham and Trenz 2013), studies of protest (Imig 2004) and public opinion (McLaren 2006; Thomassen 2009), as well as studies based on qualitative methods such as focus groups (White 2011; Duchesne et al. 2013). The discipline of IR can surely learn from these diverse conceptual and methodological instruments. In interpreting research results, however, EU related research has often fallen victim to a tendency of over-aggregation, driven by a desire to present diverse insights into the EU’s legitimation as part of one comprehensive phenomenon, rather than allowing for internal differentiation.

The conceptual brace that is most frequently used to hold together such aggregated interpretations is the concept of the “public sphere”, which is understood as encompassing all of the above-mentioned sites of legitimation, regardless of whether they are populated by actors with a professional interest in the EU (such as politicians and media personnel) or citizens who discuss EU politics as laypeople. In the context of debates about a politicization of European integration, Paul Statham and Hans-Jörg Trenz have expressed this idea as follows: “[A] public sphere includes not only those who take an active part in the debate, but it presupposes that communication resonates among others, a ‘public’, for whom it is also relevant. This resonance of public communication between institutional actors and publics is carried primarily by mass-mediated political debates. This effectively ‘brings the public back in’ to European politics” (Statham and Trenz 2014, 6).

This conception allows Statham and Trenz to treat their own research results on EU-related debates in newspapers as relevant not only to the media, but to the EU citizenry as a whole. Other evidence suggests, however, that debates about the EU and its legitimacy differ quite fundamentally depending on the discursive arena in which they take place. It makes sense
to distinguish at least three kinds of such arenas: (a) *institutional arenas* at the core of the political system, which are populated by politicians (e.g., the European Parliament or national parliaments); (b) *intermediary arenas* linking political decision-making processes to the broader citizenry, which are dominated by participants with a professional interest in politics (political parties, interest groups, the media, etc.); and (c) *citizen arenas* in which laypeople communicate about politics (at the workplace, in discussions with friends, etc.).

Most empirical studies on politicization and legitimation in the EU have thus far dealt with the first two types of arena, often implicitly assuming that the findings could be generalized to the third. But research that has focused on citizen discourses indicates that European integration remains less contested in citizen arenas than in institutional and intermediary arenas (White 2011; Duchesne et al. 2013; Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013b). What is more, only a selection of the legitimating arguments presented in institutional or intermediary arenas resonates with the citizens. In my own research, for instance, I have found that while media statements about the EU make use of a considerable range of pragmatic, moral, and identity-oriented arguments in favor of European integration (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013a), participants in focus groups with EU citizens tend to frame pro-EU arguments in a much narrower fashion, focusing primarily on direct effects of integration on their own personal lives, such as passport-free travel or the common currency (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013b). Studies on the empirical legitimacy of the EU must not gloss over such differences by applying overly generalized concepts (such as that of the “public sphere”), but should rather seek to differentiate carefully how the EU is legitimated (or de-legitimated) by various speakers and in various discursive arenas. An understanding of such differences is essential not only to assess the
severity of potential legitimation challenges, but also to trace whether (and how) certain legitimating or de-legitimating arguments spread from one arena to another.

**What does legitimation address? Squaring contextualization and differentiation**

This call for differentiation can also be extended to the objects of legitimation. Thus far, most of the EU-related literature on politicization and legitimation treats “the EU” (or “European integration”) as one unitary and homogeneous legitimation object. The advantage of this approach is that political debates about the EU can be compared to debates about other political issues, such as economic policy, migration, or the environment. Christoffer Green-Pedersen has defended this research strategy, which he labels an agenda-setting perspective, as follows: “[T]he question of the politicisation of European integration must be seen as relative. How is the issue ranked in the hierarchy of issues that constitutes the agenda[s] of political parties and the electorate? […] Politicisation thus refers to an issue with a prominent position on both agendas. As outlined above, agenda-setting literature approaches the question by comparing across issues” (Green-Pedersen 2012, 117, 121).

There are clear benefits to such attempts at contextualization, designed to prevent the drawing of far-reaching conclusions from what might ultimately be a relatively minor segment of political discourse. Yet at the same time, this approach introduces a bias: It defines European integration primarily in terms of fundamental questions of membership and institutional development, and distinguishes these from policy issues, which are treated as irrelevant to European integration. In doing so, it neglects how strongly policy making in EU member-states has become Europeanized. As a result of this bias, many academic debates about the politicization and legitimation of European integration deal disproportionately with
Euroskeptical political parties (Hooghe and Marks 2009; Adam and Maier 2011), which raise fundamental issues about European integration, but which have until now remained relatively marginal in most member states.

After six decades of European integration, the internal complexity of the European construction has grown to such an extent that it is very questionable whether “the EU” can be treated as one homogeneous object of politicization or legitimation. Rather, it seems appropriate in empirical studies to distinguish five potential objects: (a) European integration as an idea, in other words, the basic principle of exercising political authority in a Europe-wide context; (b) the EU as an organization, including its basic organizational traits, one’s country’s membership, and the EU’s geographical reach (i.e., other countries’ membership); (c) the EU’s constitutional structure, including its institutions, objectives and responsibilities, as well as decision-making procedures; (d) specific policy issues that are currently on the agenda of the EU’s legislative, executive, or judiciary institutions; as well as (e) domesticated issues, that is, issues in national politics that emerge as an implication of membership, such as cuts to national budgets mandated by Eurozone requirements (for a similar distinction, see Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013b). A categorization of this kind is particularly important to assess the implications of intensified political contestation: Other things being equal, we can assume that contestation about policy and domesticated issues, even if issues of legitimacy are raised, constitute a less fundamental challenge to the EU than contestation about the idea of integration, the EU as an organization, or its institutions.

Debates in the context of the ongoing Eurozone crisis provide a good illustration of the value of such distinctions. There is little doubt that the crisis has led to increased contestation about EU issues, including explicit legitimacy challenges that question the appropriateness of the
EU’s crisis response (Schimmelfennig 2014; Statham and Trenz 2014). On the other hand, it is noteworthy that most of this contestation has occurred in domestic political arenas, in the context of member-state elections or decision-making processes; it has, in other words, politicized the European integration primarily as a domesticated issue (Baglioni and Hurrelmann 2014; Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2014). This explains, in part, why the crisis-induced politicization, in spite of its EU-critical impetus, has not prevented the significant steps towards further supranational integration that were taken by the EU institutions in response to the crisis (Schimmelfennig 2014). The example shows that, in research about the EU’s politicization and legitimation, it is important to balance attempts at contextualization, which relate findings about “the EU” to findings on comparable political objects, with an explicit differentiation of various European integration objects that captures the EU’s institutional complexity.

What triggers legitimation change? Top-down and bottom-up processes

As is well known, European integration was initiated as an elite project whose main architects were not interested in – and at times actively sought to discourage – significant citizen mobilization (Majone 2005). In research on the EU’s politicization and legitimation, this (plausible) interpretation of the history of European integration has resulted in a tendency to view shifts towards the increasing contestation of EU-related issues exclusively as bottom-up processes forced by insurgent citizens on unwilling political decision makers, thus challenging an elite-led integration project from the outside. Paul Statham and Hans-Jörg Trenz have described this assumed trajectory of politicization as follows: “As EU-level influence in decision making increases, a diffuse awareness by European citizens that the ‘EU matters’ drives a new polarization of opinions or interests, which then leads to an increase in public claims by
collective actors that address policy formulation” (Statham and Trenz 2014, 6). The EU’s political elites, by contrast, are conceptualized as being interested only in de-politicization, trying to withdraw EU decision-making processes from public scrutiny and potential legitimation challenges (see also de Wilde and Zürn 2012; Schimmelfennig 2014).

There is ample evidence, not least from the Eurozone crisis, to show that such bottom-up trajectories are indeed a relevant feature of EU-related legitimation processes. It is important to recognize, however, that politicization and legitimation processes occur in a top-down fashion as well. Political leaders can be assumed to always be engaged in attempts to legitimate their own rule, even though the audience of such self-legitimation practices is not necessarily the whole citizenry (Barker 2001). As Rodney Barker has suggested, the successive expansion of the audiences to which rulers’ legitimation claims are directed is one way of conceptualizing the growth of the EU polity: “In this case, governors begin by legitimating themselves in their own eyes, then in those of their immediate ‘cousins’, and only when they actually begin governing, and hence creating, their citizens do they legitimate themselves in the eyes of their subjects” (Barker 2003, 166). The point here is not to suggest that the last stage in this top-down legitimation sequence has already been reached for all potential EU-related legitimation objects, but rather that it is important to realize that bottom-up politicization and legitimation processes interact with top-down processes. Many shifts in the EU’s legitimation can only be understood if both types of processes are taken into account.

A particularly good illustration is the case of the proposed Constitutional Treaty, which failed in the French and Dutch referendums in 2005. The constitutional project was not the result of pressure for constitutionalization originating from the citizens; rather the project was devised by member-state governments in an attempt to bring the EU “closer to its citizens” and to
increase the EU’s legitimacy (European Council 2001). The constitutional debates between 2000 and 2005 provide plenty of evidence detailing that the proposed constitution was seen by many of its “framers” as a device to bolster the citizens’ attachment to the EU polity, *inter alia* through the inclusion of a large number of symbolic provisions, thus allowing for a shift from technocratic to more democratic legitimation strategies (Scicluna 2012). This attempt at legitimation change through top-down politicization, however, resulted in failure, mainly because the (state-like) legitimacy claims contained in the constitution did not match most citizens’ legitimacy evaluations of the EU (Moravcsik 2006; Hurrelmann 2007). The example of the Constitutional Treaty shows that politicization and legitimation dynamics in the EU can only be understood if both bottom-up and top-down processes are taken into account, and their interaction is analyzed.

**How does legitimation relate to polity development? The fallacies of functionalism**

The debate about legitimation in the EU is strongly dominated by variants of functionalist regional integration theory. This becomes particularly clear if we examine politicization, which – as explained above – constitutes a necessary condition for legitimation to occur. The concept of politicization was first introduced into discussions of European integration by neo-functionalist theorists, who hypothesized that the growing contestation about regional issues would be one of the unintended consequences of the creation of regional institutions – a special case of “spillover”, as it were (Schmitter 1969). A number of contemporary authors have built on this logic. Pieter de Wilde and Michael Zürn, while not using the term “neo-functionalism”, describe a similar process of increases in EU authority triggering politicization, a process that in their opinion is shaped by a number of intermediary factors (such as party and media strategies), but
cannot be stopped or reversed as long as EU authority is not reduced (de Wilde and Zürn 2012). Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks have labelled their theory of politicization “post-functionalism”; its main difference to neo-functionalism lies not in the explanation of how politicization comes about, but in the fact that politicization is explicitly conceptualized as a process that mobilizes national identity concerns against European integration, and hence functions as a constraint on further steps towards supranational institutional integration (Hooghe and Marks 2009). In contrast to this account, Paul Statham and Hans-Jörg Trenz have developed a theory they call “democratic functionalism”; it assumes that politicization is not only the automatic effect of increased EU authority, but also unleashes a constant pressure towards the democratization of EU governance (Statham and Trenz 2014). All of these theoretical accounts have in common that politicization, and the legitimation debates that it gives rise to, are interpreted as standing in a quasi-deterministic relationship to the development of the EU polity: Politicization is interpreted as a necessary consequence of certain stages of polity development, and understood as having clearly defined implications for the polity’s future – even though there is disagreement between the various authors about what exactly these implications might be.

However, the trajectories of past politicization processes give reason for doubt whether the coupling of politicization/legitimation and polity development is necessarily so tight. Research by Swen Hutter and Edgar Grande on the politicization of European integration in electoral campaigns shows, for example, that in the United Kingdom, politicization levels have receded – albeit in an uneven fashion – since the accession debates of the 1970s, regardless of the fact that EU powers have grown since then (Hutter and Grande 2014). In a similar vein, a study of my own on EU-related media debates between 2000 and 2009 reveals that the politicization that was intentionally triggered by political elites in the EU’s constitutional debates
was quite effectively contained by the same elites when the Lisbon Treaty was debated. Even though the Lisbon Treaty was largely identical to the Constitution, with the exception of the latter’s symbolic provisions, media debates about it were less intensive, to a greater extent dominated by politicians, and more likely to affirm the EU’s legitimacy (Hurrelmann, Gora and Wagner 2013a). A final example is a recent study by Frank Schimmelfennig, who shows that in spite of the politicization triggered by the Eurozone crisis, political elites have been able to implement a number of far-reaching institutional reforms of EU governance, many of which strengthen technocratic supranational institutions (Schimmelfennig 2014). In other words, the crisis-induced politicization did not prove “constraining” on the EU’s polity development, nor did it necessarily push the EU into a democratic direction.

These examples highlight that, when it comes to the EU’s politicization and legitimation, theories of functionalist automaticity have to be approached with caution. The successive growth of EU competencies and supranational institutionalization might make it more likely that EU governance is politicized, and becomes subject to legitimation debates, but processes of contestation will only be triggered if political actors – governing elites, political parties, interest groups, journalists, civil society groups, etc. – explicitly raise EU issues as topics of collective decision making, and find a receptive audience for their claims in public discourse. Such discursive dynamics will also determine the precise shape that politicization/legitimation takes – the aspects of the EU to which it relates (membership, institutions, policy, etc.), the kinds of arguments/legitimation standards that are advanced (economic prosperity, democracy, common values, etc.), the political cleavages that become apparent in the debates (member state vs. member state, left vs. right, winners vs. losers of integration, etc.), and so on. Patterns of legitimation are not necessarily stable either; like all public discourse, legitimation debates are
subject to issue attention cycles that might see them disappear as topics of discussion as soon as they become “old news” and new, more pressing issues of public debate come up (Hurrelmann et al. 2009). Finally, precisely because the EU is a creation of political elites, there is not necessarily a close relationship between its politicization/legitimation and institutional development. The future shape of European integration will depend on both institutional and political configurations, but these two aspects need not develop in sync.

Conclusion: Desiderata for the Empirical Study of Legitimacy in IR

Our survey of EU-related research has shown that there is a high density of studies on the legitimation and politicization of the EU, which provide important conceptual, methodological, and substantive insights for empirical legitimation research in IR. The discipline of IR is hence well advised to look to EU Studies when conceptualizing empirical research on the legitimation and politicization of global governance. Our analysis has also shown, however, that EU related research suffers from a number of problems, rooted in conceptual fuzziness, over-aggregation, or lack of empirical rigour, which research in IR should seek to avoid. By way of conclusion, we can summarize the results of our discussion by formulating five desiderata for the empirical study of legitimacy, which apply both to the EU and to global governance more widely:

1. Legitimation analysis must study change over time using longitudinal research designs, rather than by comparing current realities to analytical constructs of the past. While the concept of “permissive consensus” is, to my knowledge, not widely used in IR, some of the existing discussions of legitimation of global governance proceed in a fashion not dissimilar to that identified in EU Studies: They assume that international politics before globalization was more-or-less completely “a-legitimate”, so that any evidence of politicization now can
be treated as indicative of a general and unidirectional trend (Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2013). Our analysis above outlines the dangers of this approach; it highlights that assumptions of a shift from “a-legitimacy” to more contested legitimation must always be empirically detailed.

2. *Legitimation analysis must differentiate various discursive arenas in which legitimation may occur, rather than using over-aggregated conceptions of a public sphere.* The fact that the density of empirical research on legitimation is thus far thinner in IR than in EU Studies means that the incentives for over-aggregation might be particularly pronounced. This might lead to researchers making sweeping generalizations, for instance the claim (in an otherwise excellent articles) that “newspapers […] are a good proxy for public debates about policies” (Rixen and Zangl 2013, 373). The experience from EU Studies suggests that, rather than making such generalizations, researchers should carefully define the domain of what they are studying, to leave room for a differentiated analysis of various legitimation arenas.

3. *Legitimation analysis must differentiate various aspects of global governance that may be politicized, rather than treating them as a unitary object of legitimation.* This rule might, at first sight, be considered less relevant for IR than for EU Studies, given that most International Organizations are less complex institutionally than the EU. But many global governance institutions have of course reached considerable complexity. And even when analyzing intergovernmental institutions that are weakly institutionalized, such as G8, a legitimation analysis that does not distinguish between, say, the principle of intergovernmental cooperation, its processes, and concrete cooperation outputs, or between intergovernmental decision-making at a summit and domestic decision-making in preparation
for the summit (Nonhoff et al. 2009), is necessarily incapable of capturing the full complexity of legitimation and politicization processes at the international sphere.

4. **Legitimation analysis must examine the interplay of top-down and bottom-up legitimation processes, rather than focussing exclusively on citizen mobilization and activism.** High-profile citizen mobilization against global governance institutions, such as the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle (1999) or against the G8 in Genoa (2001), are the most visible evidence of (de-)legitimation practices in matters of international politics. It is important, however, to complement the analysis of such bottom-up processes with research on top-down legitimation by political elites. The latter may involve attempts at de-politicization, seeking to withdrawing global governance from legitimation debates, but as the example of the EU has shown, elites may also attempt to (selectively) politicize some of their activities in order to shore up legitimation.

5. **Legitimation analysis must pay close attention to discursive and institutional dynamics, rather than assuming a necessary connection between legitimation and polity development.** Our discussion of the EU has pointed to the limits of various types of functionalist theories that assume a close conceptual connection between the development of EU institutions and the way in which European integration is politicized and/or legitimated in the population. In IR as well, attempts to forge such connections – for instance by claiming that non-transparent international institutions are more likely to face popular rejection than transparent ones (Zürn, Binder and Ecker-Ehrhardt 2013, 98), or that politicization will result in institutions becoming less prone to executive decision making (Zürn 2014, 59) – must be treated with the utmost of caution. These might be useful research hypotheses, but they must always be verified through careful analysis of both institutional and discursive dynamics.
If empirical legitimation analysis in IR follows these rules, it will be able to avoid some of the pitfalls that have, at times, undermined the quality of legitimation research in EU Studies. It is clear that, for pragmatic reasons (funding limitations, etc.), not each and every study will be able to conform to all of these rules. This does not, however, undermine their usefulness as a (tentative) guideline for how to conceptualize research on legitimation in IR.
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