

The European Union and Global Multilateral Governance - an interdisciplinary research project: Research Notes (Part 1)

Jan Wouters, Hans Bruyninckx, Stephan Keukeleire, Tim Corthaut, Sudeshna Basu & Simon Schunz

Project: Collaborative Interdisciplinary Research Project

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Project Leaders: Jan Wouters (Director of the Leuven Centre for Global Governance

Studies, Professor of International Law, University of Leuven)

Hans Bruyninckx (Professor of International Relations and Global

Environmental Governance, University of Leuven)

Stephan Keukeleire (Jean Monnet Professor of European Politics,

University of Leuven, College of Europe)

Tim Corthaut (Assistant, Institute of European Law, University of

Leuven)

Researchers: Sudeshna Basu (PhD Candidate, Faculty of Law, University of Leuven)

Simon Schunz (PhD Candidate, Faculty of Social Sciences, University

of Leuven)

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Imagine...a newly appointed Canadian delegate to the United Nations (UN) has been requested at the 62nd UN General Assembly to speak to the European Union (EU) representative about the following agenda items: 'Implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS', 'The role of diamonds in fuelling conflict' and 'The promotion of new and renewable sources of energy'. Prior to doing so, the Canadian delegate felt it would be best to first sit in on a plenary meeting to see who indeed to approach. Following the plenary the delegate is seemingly perplexed: three different individuals spoke on three different issue areas "on behalf of the EU". The question that arose in the delegate's head naturally was "who is the EU and who can I discuss these agenda items with?"

The Rationale of the Project

It is against this background that the research project "The EU and Global Multilateral

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Governance" has been set up. It seeks to tackle not only the crucial question posed by our imagined "delegate" ('who is the EU in international affairs?'), but also the questions that surround the EU's capacities and its actual role performance ('what can and does the EU do?') in an ever more complex global political arena.

These questions have become especially pertinent in light of the EU's increasing willingness to take on more responsibility and a leadership role in various global governance arrangements within and beyond the UN system (Wouters *et al.* 2006). While its declared commitment to "effective multilateralism" as a means to tackle the world's problems may at first sight seem extremely viable, the constraints the EU faces in the global governance architecture generate obstacles beyond the human eye, as seen in the scenario above.

It came to the attention of the project coordinators from the social sciences and law faculties at the University of Leuven that the concept of multilateralism in the context of global governance and the EU's role therein was of interest to both disciplines but predominantly kept analytically apart. Further, they realised that the constraints the EU is currently facing in multilateral fora are as much of a legal as they are of an institutional and political nature. To rectify the analytical divide, this interdisciplinary project was conceived.

Normative ("we have multilateral genes") and instrumental ("we are institutionally well-prepared for effective participation in multilateral governance") claims frequently made by EU representatives in support of a stronger leadership role in multilateral arrangements provided the project coordinators with even more food for thought: the numerous fundamental political and legal challenges that arise in the EU's quest to assume a leadership role in such arrangements have yet to be addressed in a collective interdisciplinary manner.

The planned analysis of the EU's capacity and actual performance in global governance has thus been designed to focus on issues surrounding the relevant legal, institutional and political frameworks at both the EU and the global level of analysis. At the EU level, issues like the dispersion of legal competences, the variety of internal decision-making procedures and forms of representation arise. At the global level, the task is to get a grip on the external environment the EU faces in its attempt to be a global player.

In view of that, the project coordinators developed a wide and long-term research agenda incorporating an extensive list of issue areas in order to identify its affiliated multilateral bodies and how the EU fares in these organizations in light of the constraints it faces. As initial test cases, the coordinators selected the issue areas of climate change and human rights, two fields which the EU is "seen" to actively participate in, in addition to commonly being labelled as a "leader". To execute this, the project coordinators took two doctoral researchers (one with a social sciences background and the other with a legal background) on board.

Objectives

The aims of the project are two-fold and can be distinguished with regard to varying time horizons.

The immediate academic output expected of the project is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of EU participation in global multilateral governance. Concretely, this approach will be based on a critical assessment of core concepts such as (EU) legal status, actorness and role on the one hand and global governance and multilateralism on the other hand, from the perspectives of both disciplines. This will serve as the basis for future joint research on topics that fall within the wider scope of the project consortium's shared research agenda. Substantively, the project intends to produce new empirical insights into the EU's contribution to the governance of two crucial issue areas (human rights and climate change).



Seen from a broader and more long-term perspective, the project aims at fostering close and enduring working relationships across disciplinary borders within and especially also beyond the University of Leuven. A declared aim of the project is to draw on existing and to establish new contacts with academics from both universities and think tanks (in Belgium and) abroad as well as with practitioners working in fields covered by the research. The project is thus also conceived as an important building block for a future cross-border and cross-disciplinary network on this emergent research programme.

Research Process and Methodology

If one important piece to the original puzzle behind this project was the observation that the EU's participation in global multilateral governance fora has predominantly been approached theoretically and methodologically from *either* a legal (Brückner 1990) or a political science perspective (Smith and Laatikainen 2006), the first questions that had to be asked was 'why is that so?' and 'how is it possible to close this divide?'.

Closing this interdisciplinary divide, it was concluded, necessitates, in a first step, a sustained dialogue on theory-related and methodological issues. To foster such a dialogue, regular meetings are held with the entire research team. Cooperation is permanent at the level of the junior researchers and very intensive between them and the senior researchers as well as between the senior researchers *inter se*.

A perpetual clashing of ideas is but a first, indispensable step to come to a common scientific language. For legal scholars, the main challenge is giving empirical research methods a chance, whereas political scientists specialized in international relations need, above all, to overcome their treatment of international and EU law as merely an outcome of political processes and to engage more thoroughly in its interpretation. The projected research embraces these challenges in allowing for developing a common frame of mind to tackle the topic before going into the substantive empirical analysis of the chosen cases. Consequently, the project is designed as a four-step process.

A first step has been reserved for an inductive analysis of primary sources (EU, UN and other bodies' legal and political documents etc.), combined with a literature review of both legal and political science approaches to this topic. This phase is meant to lay the legal and empirical foundations for the creation of an interdisciplinary conceptual framework. Fundamental questions like 'which fora is the EU involved in?', 'what forms does its participation take?', 'what are recurrent issues or problems arising in the course of its participation?', 'what concepts exist to account for this?', 'what do we know and what don't we?' will be addressed.

On this background, the subsequent phase is dedicated to the development of an interdisciplinary analytical framework for the study of the selected cases. A comparative analysis of the definitions and use of key concepts such as EU actorness, global governance and multilateralism in both literatures will pave the way for interdisciplinary concept (re)formation. Based on these newly constituted concepts, the research design(s) for the respective case studies will be drawn up. For the detailed, interdisciplinary analysis of the EU's engagement in specific issue areas, the choice for the case study method, defined as "intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is (...) to shed light on a larger class of cases" (Gerring 2007: 20), suggests itself, particularly because it allows for the integration of both legal and political science considerations and methods.

Phase three is designed to enable the researchers to carry out empirical research methods on the chosen two cases. On the basis of the interdisciplinary framework, adapted to the respective cases, the two PhD researchers will engage in in-depth analyses of the EU's participation in global human rights institutions on the one hand, and in the UN climate change regime on the other hand. In this endeavour, they will be using a combination of

legal and empirical research techniques such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews and participatory observation.

In a final phase, the outcomes of the case studies will be compared in order to come to cross-case substantive insights on the EU's performance in the two studied areas of global multilateral governance. Furthermore, an evaluation of the conceptual framework should allow for statements about the advantages and limits of interdisciplinary research on this topic.

Practical information

The project is conducted jointly - under the umbrella of the Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies (LCGGS) - by senior scholars from four research units of the University of Leuven: the Institute of International Law, the Institute of European Law, the Research Group on Global Environmental Governance and Sustainable Development and the Research Group on EU Politics and Multi-Level Governance. Two PhD researchers are involved, one attached to the Faculty of Law, the other one to the Faculty of Social Sciences. The project is headed by the Director of the LCGGS, Prof. Jan Wouters.

Conclusion

While interdisciplinary research may at times meet scepticism in some quarters of both academic disciplines, we feel that there is a strong case to be made for approaching the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective: studying a fairly new and complex issue such as the position of a hybrid actor, like the EU, in an environment characterized by a proliferation of formal and informal global governance fora demands for both sound legal and empirical analysis. The project takes this logic all the way to test out the utility of a joint approach to this subject matter. Results of this endeavour will be discussed in future editions of the Journal of Contemporary European Research.

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