Introduction: Networks in European Union Governance

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Given its complex multilevel governance structures, the European Union (EU) is an obvious focus for studying policy networks as informal coordination mechanisms between state and non-state or public and private actors. The importance of this research field has increased exponentially with the EU's spatial expansion, its institutional deepening, its forays into new policy areas and its growing role as an international actor. Research on policy networks at first focussed on analysing changes in national political systems and policy-making in particular policy fields. This approach is now being applied more systematically and comprehensively to understanding the transformation of EU governance during the last decade.

Concurrently, the wide-spread belief until well into the 1990s that European integration was a system of policy-making 'sui generis' that could not be fruitfully compared to anything else no longer has much support. The EU is increasingly contrasted and compared vertically, to national political systems and forms of governance in its member-states, especially federal states such as Germany. At the same time, new research is developing that compares the EU and its policy-making to the United States.

However, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, crucial dimensions of the role of policy networks in EU governance are distinctive. Thus, as Tanja Börzel and Karen Heard-Lauréote show, EU actors have become increasingly preoccupied with the EU's alleged 'democratic deficit'. In the wake of the Commission crisis of 1999 and the failed referendums in France and the Netherlands in 2005 and Ireland in 2008, this has induced the Commission to invest great hopes in policy networks as means of enhanced input legitimacy through increased participation of civil society organisations in policy-making. Originally, policy networks were thought to contribute to output legitimacy by improving the quality of policies through expert input and the involvement of economic actors. They had never been expected to enhance the democratic input quality of governance at the national level. Indeed, as Börzel and Heard-Lauréote argue, they might not be able to do so at EU level, or only to a limited extent and possibly, at the expense of efficiency and output legitimacy.

The EU expansion from 12 member-states at the time of the Maastricht Treaty to the current 27 has created institutional and socio-economic tensions that have impacted on existing policy network structures. As Christian Henning demonstrates in his article, network analysis provides a powerful tool for the quantitative analysis of complex governmental systems. As regards the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), lobbying structures not only differ systematically between new and old member states, but also have altered significantly from the EU-15 to the EU-27. In particular, on-going integration processes and the reorientation of the CAP towards consumer interests resulting form the 'Agrarwende' induced a greater supranational orientation of interest intermediation in governance structures, while the eastern enlargements of 2004–7 induced a re-nationalization of the CAP fostering national clientelism.

In their article, Dimitris Christopoulos and Lucia Quaglia map policy networks in EU banking regulation using formal social network analysis. In their case, the EU network in banking regulation was engaged in turning international 'soft' rules on bank capital requirements into 'hard' EU law. This EU network operates at the interface between levels of governance: national, EU and international, given the global reach of financial activities. After initial nation-state firefighting, the world financial crisis starting in 2008 after the completion of research for this article, may well trigger new demands for much tighter EU level regulation of the banking sector and entail a transformation of its networking activities.

In her article on the formation and institutionalisation of networks of political foundations in the EU, Dorota Dakowska shows the crucial role of supranational institutions in recognizing and legitimising networks and endowing them with financial support. Accounts of European integration that limit the role of supranational institutions to facilitating multi-lateral bargaining among member-states ignore their 'gatekeeper' function in giving institutions a recognised role in larger networks. To understand such linkages better, Dakowska argues, it is necessary to go beyond the study of clearly delineated policy networks in particular policy domains and to analyse transnational networks and norm entrepreneurs acting 'between politics and policies in EU decision-making'.

Much of the nationally focussed policy network literature assumes that networks in or as governance is a new phenomenon that has grown on the 'ruins of the nation-state' in the 1970s. However, my concluding article in this issue shows that network-type relations were crucial in many ways for politics and policy-making in the 'core Europe' of six member-states before the first enlargement of 1973. The

interesting question about diachronic change in networks in or as EU governance is what precisely changed in network forms and their impact and when this happened, for example, the greater activation of business actors in networks in the 1970s and of civil society actors in the 1990s.

In analysing the role of policy networks in the EU, the contributors to this special issue do not take a simple pro or con position in the debate about whether networks play an important role in governance or constitute a new form of governance. In fact, the structures, activities and functions of networks in the EU appear to vary too much to allow for such sweeping generalisations. Collectively, the papers endorse theoretical and methodological pluralism and stay away from grand meta-theoretical battles. Instead, the special issue combines articles utilizing quantitative, formal social network analysis and more descriptive qualitative approaches to understanding different dimensions of networked European politics and transdisciplinary collaboration embracing both historical and contemporary analysis of EU governance.