



# Dissecting International Public Administration

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## **Abstract**

As an area of research, specifying crucial conditions under which international public administration (IPA) may enjoy independence from member-state governments has become an increasingly vibrant research area. This special issue responds to three yet unresolved research tasks: (i) Systematically *comparing* IPAs by offering large-N data across cases; (ii) Taking *organization* seriously by identifying how the organisational architectures of IPAs affect decision-making processes and subsequently the pursuit of public policy making; (iii) Examining the varied *consequences* of the autonomization of IPAs, notably for member-state public sector governance and for the integration of transnational regulatory regimes.

## **Keywords**

Autonomy - international public administration - organization structure - temporal sorting - socialization

## Introduction

International bureaucracies constitute a distinct and increasingly important feature of both global governance studies and public administration scholarship. This special issue<sup>1</sup> offers one vital step in advancing these types of studies by offering a ‘public administration’ approach. This entails that the study of international governmental organisations (IGOs) become somehow ‘normalized’, i.e. that a public administration turn comes to characterize IGO studies (Trondal 2007). Recent studies have suggested that international public administration (IPA) profoundly influence global governance (Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009), transform power distributions across levels of government (Egeberg and Trondal 2009), and change the conduct of domestic public sector governance (Keohane et al. 2009). Moreover, IPAs are called upon to cope with ever more wicked and unruly public problems. Turbulence in world politics is partly caused by turbulent political-administrative systems, partly by turbulent environments, and partly by how organisations and their environments poorly match – thus creating turbulence of scale. Together these challenges produce complexity, uncertainty, and time constraints for decision-makers. Turbulence of these kinds reveals the fragility of existing institutions and serves as test-beds for the sustainability of existing governance arrangements. IPAs may be seen as one *coping mechanism* in an ever more turbulent global scene (Ansell et al. 2016).

Yet, public administration scholarship has largely deserted the comparative study of IPAs, including its multilevel character (Benz et al. 2016). In this light, the current special issue is particularly welcomed. Moreover, this lacuna reflects generic gulfs between most social science sub-disciplines. For instance, despite vast scholarship on both (public sector) governance and organisation theory, respectively, these strands of research have been in mutual disregard (e.g. Kettl 2002; Olsen 2010). Moreover, the empirical foci of several social science sub-disciplines often poorly intersect: For instance, whereas research on public sector organisations has largely focused on domestic ministerial departments and subordinate agencies (e.g. Verhoest et al. 2012), IGO scholarship has paid scant attention to their bureaucratic interior (e.g. Hawkins et al. 2006; Karns and Mingst 2004). Besides, European Union studies have primarily been preoccupied with studying the European Commission and subordinated regulatory agencies and largely neglected systematic comparative assessments (the N=1 fallacy) (e.g. Bauer and Trondal 2015).

Modern governments daily formulate and execute policies with significant consequences for society. With the growing role of IPAs, one unresolved question is to what extent and under what conditions such institutions may formulate their own policies – and pursue a *de facto* autonomous regulatory agenda – and thereby trans-

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pend a mere intergovernmental secretarial role. The leeway of IGOs is arguably to a large extent supplied by the autonomy of its bureaucratic arm, that is, by the ability of IPAs to act relatively independently of decision premises that emanate from member-state governments (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Biermann and Siebenhüner 2009, 2013; Cox and Jacobson 1973; Reinalda 2013; Trondal 2013). The special issue illuminates that IPAs are indeed rule-makers and sometimes even rule-implementers. It is thus essential to know how autonomous IPAs are and how it can be explained. Scholars of various disciplines have started to explore the conditions under which IPAs are 'truly' independent of member-state governments, yet, the findings remain inconclusive (e.g., Beyers 2010; Checkel 2007; Moravcsik 1999). IPAs are seen as rifted between member-state dominance, the concern for the collective good, administrative 'siloization' and portfolio concerns, as well as transnational regulatory institutions driven by epistemic communities of experts (Trondal et al. 2015). As a consequence, academics, politicians and IPA officials have different views on the independent role of IPAs. This special issue indeed aims to connect some of the dots by offering new empirical findings.

## Theorising IPAs: beyond mapping

One necessary factor in building common political order is the establishment of common institutions, including a permanent congress independent of national governments serving the common interest (Skowronek 1982). In an international context it necessitates the rise of *separate* international institutions that are able to act relatively independently. IPAs might indeed be such institutions. Whilst the empirical puzzle is to what extent IPAs enjoy *de facto* independence, the ensuing theoretical puzzle is to specify conditions thereof (Bauer and Ege, forthcoming 2016). The special issue offers advances to both puzzles. It is shown that the task of IPAs has become increasingly that of active and independent policy-making institutions and less that of passive technical supply instruments for IGO plenary assemblies.

The classical study of IGOs did not permit an independent role for IPAs (Knill and Bauer, forthcoming 2016). International-relations approaches viewed IGOs as epiphenomena to interstate relations. Regime literature similarly downplayed the organisational dimension of IGOs, and IGOs were largely seen as regime facilitators (Gehring 2003: 11). The seminal work of Cox and Jacobson (1973: 428) reflected this view by concluding that 'international organisations facilitate the orderly management of intergovernmental relations without significantly changing the structure of power that governs these relations (...)'. The 1960s and 1970s saw several studies of IGOs that treated them as hubs of international networks and regimes rather than as organisations and institutions in their own right (e.g. Nye 1975). The epistemic community literature focused on IGOs as facilitators of transnational epistemic communities (E. Haas 1990; P. Haas 1992). This literature made 'experts' and their 'ways of doing things' ever more paramount to studies of proposing, implementing and legitimizing public policy (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Joerges 1999; Joerges et al. 1997: 7).

Concomitantly, beyond single-case studies of IPAs there were a surprising shortage of theoretically-informed comparative studies of their inner life and their wider role in global governance (Claude 1956). Consequently, 'to date, we do not really know how to conceptualize international organisations and how to deal with the organisational components...' of IPAs (Gehring 2003: 13). The research challenge targeted by the special issue is to bring IPAs back into the study of global governance and the study of public administration (Knill and Bauer 2016; Eckhard and Ege, forthcoming 2016).

Assuming that IPAs 'matter' entails that we should take seriously how they are organised and how this may have consequences for decision-making processes and the subsequent pursuit of public policy making. In the classical study of decision-making processes in organisations, organisations were seen as permitting stable expectations providing general stimuli and attention directors to actors (Mintrom 2015). Yet, the way organisational structure shapes interaction, loyalty, cooperation, and information-processing are more adequately recognized in the organisation theory literature than in most other social science literatures - for example the IGO literature (e.g. Cox and Jacobsen 1973), the governance literature (e.g. Levi-Faur 2012) as well as broader political science literatures (Olsen 2006). The special issue suggests that IPAs cannot be adequately understood without including organisational variables. Doing so implies bringing organisational structure and ways of organizing back into IGO studies. Organizational structure can be defined as role expectations with regard to who can and should do what, how and when. In this sense, the organisation structure is a formalised, impersonal and normative *structure* that analytically separates structure from decision *behaviour or process* (Scott 1981). The organisational structure of IPAs consists both of the structure of the administration as well as how this structure is embedded in the wider IGO structure.

An organisational theory approach assumes that IPAs may possess 'own' organizational capacities that automatize the behaviour of own administrative staff. This may happen through mechanisms such as control (behavioural adaptation through hierarchical control and supervision), discipline (behavioural adaptation through incentive systems), and/or socialization (behavioural internalization through established bureaucratic cultures) (Page 1992; Weber 1983). These mechanisms ensure that IPAs may perform their tasks relatively independently from outside pressure but within boundaries set by the legal authority and (political) leadership of which they serve (Weber 1924). Causal emphasis is put on the internal organisational structures of IPAs. This idea offers a picture of formal organisations as creators of 'organisational man' (Simon 1965) and as a stabilizing element in politics more broadly (Olsen 2010). IPAs may thus develop their own nuts and bolts quite independently of society, and concomitantly that international civil servants may act upon roles that are shaped by the IPA in which they are embedded.

How can we adequately and accurately measure autonomy? The concept of bureaucratic autonomy has not been neatly defined in literature. A working definition applied has been that 'autonomy is about discretion, or the extent to which [an organisation] can decide itself about matters that it considers important' (Verhoest et al.

2010: 18–19). Whereas most literature on the independence of public sector organisations assesses autonomy by considering their *de jure* formal-legal design (e.g., Gilardi 2008; Huber and Shipan 2002), far less attention has been devoted to studying real-life autonomy of IPAs, for instance through how IPA staff themselves perceive their autonomy (Maggetti and Verhoest 2014: 245; Trondal 2010: 147). Bauer and Ege (forthcoming 2016) capture autonomy by studying the capacity of the administration to develop autonomous preferences ('autonomy of will') and its ability to translate these preferences into action ('autonomy of action').

How then can we explain the autonomy of IPAs? This special issue suggests that organisational factors may be useful. One rationale for emphasising organizational factors is that 'the evidence remains still quite inconclusive about the effects of formal structural-organisational factors on the autonomy of agencies' and their employees' autonomy perceptions (Maggetti and Verhoest 2014: 247). Organizational factors include organisation structure, organizational location, organisational demography and organisational culture (Egeberg et al. 2016). The special issue discusses two such variables: organisational structure and temporal sorting. This commentary would also add socialization dynamics to this discussion (see below).

### **Organisational structure**

It is shown by the special issue that the role of IPAs reflects, broadly speaking, how they are organised. Similar organisational structures may for example account for why administrative styles are rather similar across IPAs (Knill et al., forthcoming 2016). Organizational capacities may also account for the strong role of DG Budget in EU's new budgetary procedure (Goetz and Patz, forthcoming 2016). Yet, proponents of an organisational theory approach (Egeberg et al. 2016) do not claim to provide a complete or comprehensive explanation of policy processes and policy contents. Rather, the argument is that organisational factors (independent variables) might intervene in actors' behavioural perceptions (dependent variable) and create a systematic bias, thus making some process characteristics and outputs more likely than others (Gulick 1937; March and Olsen 1984; Simon 1965). Organizations provide frames for storing experiences, cognitive maps categorizing complex information, procedures for reducing transaction costs, regulative norms that add cues for appropriate behaviour, and physical boundaries and temporal rhythms that guide actors' perceptions of relevance with respect to administrative behaviour. Organizations also discriminate between which conflicts should be attended to and which should be de-emphasized (Egeberg 2006). By organising civil servants into permanent bureaucracies within IGOs, a system of 'rule followers and role players' is established relatively independently of the domestic branch of executive government (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; March and Olsen 1998: 952).

One can assume, for instance, that *organisational affiliations* would matter for the autonomy of IPAs. One initial proposition is that the supply of independent administrative capacities in IPAs represents a *primary* organisational structure for IPA staff, whereas their *secondary* structures consist of part-time (such as transnational networks) or past organisational memberships (such as previous employments). IPAs

serve as the primary organisational affiliation for international civil servants, rendering them particularly sensitive to the organizational signals and selections provided by this structure. The autonomy perceptions evoked by officials may thus be expected to be primarily directed towards those administrative units that are the primary supplier of relevant decision premises. Because IPA officials spend most of their time and energy in sub-units of their primary organisations, they may be expected to chiefly attend to concerns of IPA subunits and less towards IGO as wholes (Ashforth and Johnson 2001: 36). Subsequently, IPA personnel are likely to orient their behaviour towards their present IPA units rather than to the concerns of member state governments. Administrative staff is thus expected to evoke 'inward-looking' behavioural patterns geared towards their 'own' sub-units and task environments. We may expect that IPA officials evoke Weberian virtues of party-political neutrality, attaching identity towards their divisions and portfolios, and attending chiefly to administrative rules and proper procedures of their primary structure (Richards and Smith 2004).

A second assumption would be that the autonomy of IPAs is facilitated by how they are organisationally *specialized*. For example, administrative styles (see Knill et al., forthcoming 2016) may vary systematically between organisational sub-units – reflecting the departmentalization of IPAs. Organizations tend to accumulate conflicting organisational principles through horizontal and vertical specialization. When specializing formal organisations horizontally, one important principle (among several) is by major *purpose* served like research, health, food safety, etc. (Gulick 1937). This principle of specialization is recurrent inside IPAs. For example, the European Commission is a horizontally pillarized administration, specialized by purpose and with historically weak organisational capabilities for horizontal coordination at the top through administrative coordination and Presidential oversight (Dimitrakopoulos and Kassim 2005). However, recent administrative reforms and enhanced presidential ambitions to 'get the house in order' have improved such capacities somewhat (e.g. Kassim et al. 2013). Similarly, the WTO and OECD secretariats are also specialized administrations consisting of divisions or directorates responsible for different areas of cooperation, such as agriculture, environment, development, statistics, etc. This principle of organisation tends to activate administrative styles among incumbents following sectoral cleavages. For example, coordination and contact patterns tend to be channeled within sectoral portfolios rather than between them. Arguably, organisation by 'major purpose served' is likely to bias decision-making dynamics inwards toward the bureaucratic organisation where preferences, contact patterns, roles, and loyalties are directed toward sectoral portfolios, divisions, and units. This mode of horizontal specialization results in less than adequate horizontal coordination across departmental units and better coordination within units (Ansell 2004: 237). The horizontal specialization of IPAs by major purpose is thus conducive to their autonomization.

### **Temporal sorting**

One often forgotten organisational variable in organisation studies – as well as in the study of IPAs – is the temporal variable. The issue brings this variable back in (Goetz



and Patz, forthcoming 2016). As amplified by the garbage can approach, behavior and change in organisations have a *temporal dimension* (Cohen et al. 1976). As with the garbage can theory of organisations or the multiple streams approach to public policy, temporal complexity calls attention to the dynamic and sometimes paradoxical interaction of problems and solutions. The clash of time scales generates temporal complexity. A solution may lead a problem to change, cause new problems, or simply have trouble keeping up with the changing nature of problems. Temporal complexity should thus be one essential ingredient in our assessment of IPAs. For instance, polyrhythmic IPAs with several tempi would for example be considered more turbulent than IPAs geared towards only one tempo. Several rhythmic patterns may also concurrently co-exist in a mutually competing – yet compatible – whole. When several rhythmic patterns are layered like this, the resulting temporal system inside IPAs may become complex and challenging, but at the same time unlocking possibilities for innovation and change that are embedded in each pattern. Temporal complexity should thus be one essential ingredient in our assessment of IPAs.

We may also consider that certain temporal patterns within organisations match more easily with certain temporal patterns in the environments. For example, polyrhythmic IPAs may relatively easily adapt to multiple and shifting rhythms in member-states. Mono-rhythmic IPAs, by contrast, would face relatively more uncertainty and risk if faced with multi-rhythmic member-states. Moreover, unsettled and weakly institutionalized IPAs with high temporal complexity might arguably adapt more easily to turbulent environments with high temporal complexity than settled and strongly institutionalized IPAs with low temporal complexity.

A second temporal variable is *tempo*, or speed. One might assume that with increased speed comes a tendency for repetition. During turbulent times when the tempo in IPAs increases, established governance practices might be subject to test. So, turbulence is likely to be inversely correlated with speed. High-speed governance processes are thus likely to experience a tendency to repeat past successes, or what is perceived as past successes (March 2010: 16). By repeating this way, IPAs may be victims of trained incapacity to improvise – merely due to high speed of conduct. Taking the example of jazz as a temporally sorted activity, jazz musicians may play very fast tunes, with the likely consequence of repetition of patterns just ‘to keep the performance going’ (Weick 1998: 553). Slow moving jazz, by contrast, would enable musicians’ larger leeway for embellishment of items. Thus, up-tempo decision-making within IPAs may reduce the likelihood of exploration or innovation. But it may also speak to the need for an enhanced diversity of governance repertoires.

### **Socialization dynamics**

Supplementing the role of organisational structures and temporal sorting, governing IPAs may also be subject to socialization effects. A vast literature reveals that the impact of pre-socialization of actors is modified by organisational re-socialization (e.g. Checkel 2007). Arguably, IPAs with a high socialization potential would more effectively automate its staff compared to IPAs with weaker socialization potential. Officials entering IPAs for the first time are subject to an organisational ‘exposure effect’

(Johnston 2005: 1039) that may contribute to such re-socialization. Socialization is a dynamic process whereby staff is induced into the norms and rules of a given community. By this process, individuals may come to gradually internalize some shared norms and rules of the community (Checkel 2007). Socialization processes are conducive to 'autonomization' of the socialized, because the one socializing may educate, indoctrinate, teach, or diffuse his or her norms and ideas to the one being socialized. The socialization argument also claims that behavioural autonomy is conditioned by enduring experiences with institutions, accompanying perceptions of appropriate behaviour (Herrmann and Brewer 2004: 14). The potential for socialization to occur is assumed positively related to the duration and the intensity of interaction amongst the organisational members. Chief to the neo-functionalist approach, the potential for re-socialization to occur ('shift of loyalty toward a new center') is assumed positively associated with the duration and the intensity of interaction among actors (Haas 1958: 16). Intensive in-group interaction is assumed conducive to the emergence of relative stable social, normative, and strategic networks that provide autonomous impact on the participants' perceptions of strategic and appropriate behaviour (Atkinson and Coleman 1992: 161; Hay and Richards 2000). In sum, the length of stay in IPAs – or the individual seniority of incumbents – may foster socialization toward a supranational behavioural pattern. Concomitantly, behavioural and role autonomy is nurtured by the sheer quantity and quality of actor-interaction inside IPAs.

## Looking ahead

There has been a lack of three kinds of IPA studies which the issue responds to:

- (i) Systematic comparative studies of IPAs by offering large-N data across cases (e.g. Barnett and Finnemore 2004);
- (ii) Studies that takes organisation seriously analyzing how the organisational architectures of IPAs may bias their everyday governance processes and subsequently the pursuit of public policy making (e.g. Trondal et al. 2010);
- (iii) Studies that examines the varied consequences of the autonomization of IPAs, notably for member-state public sector governance (e.g. Bach et al. 2015) as well as for transnational regulatory regimes (e.g. Abbott et al. 2016).

Departing from the latter challenge, one promising research avenue is what kind of consequences that may emanate from the autonomization of IPAs. Studies of the European Commission suggest that capacity-building inside IPAs enables them to build ever-closer administrative networks with other IPAs and to pool administrative resources among these into some kind of common administrative capacity. IPAs may, for instance, capture agendas of other actors – such as member-state government institutions. This may fuel the emergence of multilevel administrative structures which facilitate policy coordination across levels of authority (Benz et al., forthcoming 2016). Studies suggest for instance that the rise of independent administrative capacities around the European Commission increase its ability to co-opt administrative sub-centers by stealth – notably European Union agencies and domestic agencies. This enhanced ability to co-opt or capture, however, probably also reaches towards agencies within IGOs such as the WTO and the OECD - thus integrating and pooling

global administrative resources. Moreover, studies suggest that *compatible* organisational structures among IPAs increase the likelihood of mutual integration among them. This is reflected in the development of direct links between Commission DGs and 'their' partner EU agencies (Egeberg et al. 2015) and between Commission DGs and domestic agencies and their agency networks (Egeberg et al. 2016). Egeberg and Trondal (2009) show for instance that the Commission takes active part in the daily practicing of EU legislation within domestic agencies, and thus that Commission DGs in practice partly co-opt domestic administrative resources. This example shows that the supply of administrative capacities inside IPAs may have profound consequences for emergence of integrated global governance infrastructure beyond direct member-state control. The special issue contributes both to empirical examination of such infrastructures and inspires future research of these.

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