

Engineering policy change: How do policy entrepreneurs leverage multi-level contextual factors to drive change in European Union foreign policy?

The past decade has seen major shifts in Europe's geopolitical landscape, highlighted by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This has prompted the European Union (EU) to rethink its foreign and security policies. In response, the EU has adopted new security measures since 2016, even breaking old taboos like not delivering arms to conflict zones. However, how and why these policy changes happen remains less understood.

The project seeks to address this gap by introducing a novel theoretical framework that combines insights from public policy, political science, and international relations. At the heart of this framework is a focus on agency, specifically the role of actors (called policy entrepreneurs) in international organizations, and how these actors drive policy changes. The project explores the interaction between agency—the capacity of actors to shape their environment—and structure—the multi-level contextual factors that define the political landscape. The project proposes that these two elements interact to propel EU foreign policy change. A distinctive feature of the project's approach is its emphasis on the role of policy entrepreneurs operating across multiple levels: national, EU, and global. These entrepreneurs, equipped with varying resources and access to policy-making venues, are considered central players who engineer policy shifts. They act as catalysts who leverage contextual factors at different levels to push their ideas forward and achieve policy change. Given EU foreign policy's institutional and issue complexity, the project assumes that numerous policy entrepreneurs interact, sometimes competing, to influence the policy-making process. Moreover, to explain how policy changes occur, the project adapts and further develops the Multiple Streams Approach. This approach posits that policy change happens when policy entrepreneurs manage to link three distinct streams: the policy stream (ideas and solutions), the problem stream (issues and challenges on the global or national level), and the politics stream (political will and context at the EU or member state level). Successful linkage of these streams at the right political moment leads to what is called multiple coupling—the alignment of conditions that result in policy adoption. The process spans various stages, from agenda-setting to policy formulation, decision-making, and eventual implementation.

The project applies this framework to real-world cases like the European Peace Facility, the EU's military mission in support of Ukraine, and the European Defence Industrial Strategy, showing why these policy instruments, long discussed in the EU, were only recently implemented. It also examines why certain policy ideas, like the introduction of the Qualified Majority Voting in sanctions and human rights, haven't seen change despite significant debate. The project uses this case to explore why, even with favorable conditions, some policies do not see the necessary political momentum for change. It shows that while there is increasing support for QMV, the reluctance of certain member states to cede further sovereignty in foreign policy has blocked its progress.

Using process tracing, the project examines the strategies employed by various policy entrepreneurs in each of these cases, looking at how they maneuvered within the EU's multi-level governance structure to promote their ideas. The project also assesses how contextual factors, such as national political dynamics, global challenges, and EU-level political opportunities, were leveraged to drive or impede policy change. Additionally, the project conducts surveys and in-depth interviews to understand the perspectives of political elites in key member states regarding the acceptability of these policy changes.

The project's theoretical framework not only offers a new lens to understand EU foreign policy but also provides broader insights into how policy change occurs in other complex settings. By focusing on the interactions between agency and structure and by highlighting the multi-level nature of decision-making in international organizations, the project contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms driving policy shifts on the global stage.