

**Between politicization and legitimacy:  
transnational political discourse on EU institutional reform (EUDIS)**

Over the last years, the debate about the necessity of EU institutional reform - including revision of EU treaties - has intensified due to several external shocks and EU internal developments. The COVID-19 pandemic, security crisis caused by the Russian aggression on Ukraine and the ongoing war, re-election of Donald Trump in the US resulting in a qualitative shift in transatlantic relations, as well as prospect of EU enlargement – all have exposed the Union’s insufficient capacity not only to defend itself and its citizens but also to effectively respond to various geopolitical and internal challenges. While reform skeptical national leaders usually say that citizens do not want EU institutional reform and treaty revisions, European public opinion surveys and empirical studies show that citizens actually opt for more integration in various policy areas, especially in defense and foreign policy, reject the Commission's exclusive right of legislative initiative calling for it to be granted to the EP, and prefer majority voting over unanimity.

In view of this paradox, the underlying aim of this project is to explore the political dynamics of the ongoing transnational debate on the European Union’s (EU) institutional reform in order to identify and explain patterns of its (de)politicization, (re)contextualization and (de)legitimization vis-à-vis EU citizens. To this aim, the project seeks to answer five research questions of exploratory, explanatory and theoretical nature: 1) *What are the positions of political actors regarding the need for and scope of EU institutional reform?* 2) *How do political actors (de)politicize, (re)contextualize and (de)legitimize the need for EU institutional reforms, including treaty changes?* 3) *What structural factors influence political actors’ positions on the EU institutional reform?* 4) *What is the impact of external crises on the EU reform debate and the positions of political actors?* 5) *Under what conditions the idiosyncratically divergent discourses could produce a joint rationalizing narrative for an acceptable offer of EU reform?*

Stemming from the newly theorized concept of ‘European multilevel party field’ (Pittoors 2025) and applying a transnational analytical lens, this project will explore the discursive strategies of the members of national parliaments (MPs), the European Parliament (MEPs) as well as national executives (MS’ governments) understood as citizens’ representatives, narrators and legitimacy intermediaries in the EU multi-level political system. This research timeline includes a debate triggered by the Conference on the Future of Europe (2021) and shaped by subsequent geopolitical events such as the Russian invasion on Ukraine (2022), the ongoing war resulting in a European security crisis, the return of EU enlargement paradigm (2022), as well as the re-orientation of the US transatlantic policy (2025).

The methodological approach applied in this project stems from theoretical underpinnings of discursive institutionalism and combines qualitative and quantitative methods in a comparative design. The empirical material includes political speech acts gathered from three different discursive arenas: parliamentary debates (EP and national parliaments), mass media and interviews. The research questions 1-4 will be addressed through the means of content analysis, thematic discourse analysis and statistical methods to identify what the actors’ stances are, unravel their argumentative discursive strategies, cognitive frames and motivations, explain how discursive patterns are shaped by different explanatory factors. To address the last research question about conditions for potential compromise, an analysis of gathered findings and identified patterns will be triangulated with the insights from semi-structured interviews. This project aims at generating new hypotheses grounded in empirical data leading to the development of a grounded theory of discursive compromise. In view of an observable gap between the strategic importance of political and social legitimization of potential EU reforms on the one hand, and the deficit of state-of-the-art research explaining the underlying discursive dynamics of the reform agenda on the other, this project undertakes a pioneering attempt to explain the patterns of (de)politicization, (re)contextualization and (de)legitimization of the EU reform debate taking into account both structural and contextual factors of the transnational discursive dynamics. By applying an integrative methodological approach based on a sequential mixed methods design, it will bring novel empirical and theoretical contributions to the research on EU integration, democracy and political discourse.