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Objectives and Methodological Framework of the Doctoral Dissertation “Decision-Making in the Council of the European Union. A Constructivist Approach”

Providing an explanation of the decision-making in the Council of the European Union is important because of the central role of the Council in the institutional system of the EU. The course and outcomes of this process might be influenced by various factors, e.g. decision-making in the Council is rich in intra- and inter-institutional interactions, and the multi-layered structure of the Council further complicates any analysis. Theorists dedicated to the rationalist paradigm usually exclude some of those factors (like ideas or identity) from their analyses, deeming them irrelevant¹. Adopting a constructivist approach enables a different standpoint. Constructivism is “based on social ontology which insists that human agents do not exist independently from their social environment and its collectively shared systems of meanings”². Among the factors omitted by rational-choice theories, the socialisation of the Council officials, understood as “a process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community”³, seems to be emphasised the most in constructivist literature. I assume that this emphasis is valid and taking socialisation into account is indeed a distinguishing feature of constructivist approach to the decision-making in the Council.

The essence of the problem here is to find causal mechanisms linking socialisation to the course and outcomes of the decision-making process in the Council of the EU and analyse their significance, thus assessing the influence socialisation might have on the decision adopted by the Council. It is also crucial to take the multi-layered structure

¹ A. Moravcsik, *Constructivism and European Integration. A Critique*, in: *The Social Construction of Europe*, T. Christiansen, K.E. Jørgensen, A. Wiener (eds.), London 2001, p. 181–182.

² T. Risse, *Social Constructivism and European Integration*, in: *European Integration Theory*, A. Wiener, T. Diez (eds.), Oxford 2009, p. 145.

³ J.T. Checkel, *International Institutions and Socialization in Europe. Introduction and Framework*, “International Organization” 2005, no. 4, p. 804.

of the Council into account because each of these mechanisms might be more or less prominent in different layers.

This short article aims to present the doctoral dissertation I am currently preparing at the Faculty of Journalism and Political Science of the University of Warsaw. First, I summarise the objectives of my research and state the main hypothesis. Then, in the following section, I try to show the significance of my inquiry. I continue this topic in the third section, showing the innovative aspects of my thesis. The penultimate section shows the structure of my thesis, while the final one is devoted to the methods I use in my dissertation.

Research objectives

The problem described in the introduction is reflected in the main research objective of the thesis, which is an empirical verification of socialisation impact on the course and outcomes of the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union, as theorised in constructivism. Additionally, my dissertation has a theoretical objective to critically analyse the constructivist approach in the research of the political system of the European Union, especially the EU institutions, as well as assess its usefulness and contribute to its development in Poland, where it attracted little interest so far. Lack of critical theoretical reflection would invalidate empirical research, not least because of the research methods chosen. Thus, in conjunction with the empirical objective, this reflection will improve the results of my research by making wider generalisation possible, as well as providing arguments for a well-grounded opinion on how adopting a constructivist approach might yield more substantial findings in EU studies: deeper understanding and better explanations.

The research hypothesis has been formulated as follows: *socialisation influences the course and outcomes of the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union due to causal mechanisms, which are affected by the multi-layered structure of the Council*. Three variables can be isolated in the hypothesis. The independent variable is socialisation, which will be conceptualised after Checkel, with three different “depths” or “intensities” distinguished. First, socialisation might be very shallow, a result of strategic calculation. Second, it might be related to role-playing. Third, if it is accompanied by normative suasion, it is transforming (constructing) the identity of the actors⁴.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 808–813.

The dependent variable is the course and outcomes of the decision-making in the Council, that is the negotiations that take place in the different layers of the Council, voting or consensual decision-taking, and finally, the adopted decisions. The causal processes might be understood as an intervening variable. They are transferring the causal forces from the independent to the dependent variable. It is assumed, that their occurrence is influenced by the multi-layered structure of the Council. The detailed conceptualisation and operationalisation of causal mechanisms will be undertaken in the penultimate chapter of the planned dissertation (see below), and will be based on the above-mentioned typology of socialisation and literature review.

It is important to note that the occurrence, mechanisms, intensity or depth of socialisation in the Council, while relevant to the research problem, are not part of it. These issues are analysed to some extent in existing literature, and findings from it will be utilised accordingly, especially in the fourth chapter.

The most important result of my research will be either supporting or denying constructivist claim that socialisation influences the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union and thus strengthening or weakening the (more general) constructivist explanation of this process. The thesis is also expected to contribute to theory development, both by critical analysis of the constructivist paradigm in EU studies, and the possibility, inherent to the process-tracing research method, of finding unexpected causal mechanisms and links in the decision-making process.

Significance of inquiry

Enquiry into the decision-making in the Council of the European Union is justified by at least two reasons. First, it constitutes an important part of research on the decision-making process in the EU. Due to the *sui generis* nature of the Union, concerns are raised over democratic quality, openness and transparency of decision-making. Providing a better understanding of its course and explaining its outcomes facilitates addressing these concerns through normative reflection⁵.

Secondly, while there have been some publications on the decision-making in the EU in Polish language⁶, the specific issue of how decisions are made in the Council has

⁵ J.T. Checkel, *Constructivist approaches to European integration*, "ARENA Working Papers" 2006, no. 6, p. 20–21.

⁶ *Confer*: R. Trzaskowski, *Dynamika reformy systemu podejmowania decyzji w Unii Europejskiej*, Warszawa 2005.

not received much interest yet. Moreover, much of the Polish literature on these topics was so far mostly concerned with formal arrangements, and in the case of the Council, voting weights of the member states. I wish to contribute to the effort of narrowing the gap between Polish and international European studies and focus on the actual functioning of the institution rather than merely describe procedures. The emphasis is also placed more on politics than on polity⁷.

Because of the ubiquity of the rationalist paradigm in European studies, adopting a constructivist approach gives more opportunities for a meaningful contribution in the field by encouraging verification of established views. As mentioned above, the emphasis placed on institutional socialisation is assumed to be a distinctive feature of social constructivism, which is why its influence on decision-making process was chosen as the means to test the constructivist explanation of the decision-making in the Council of the European Union.

There are three aspects of the importance of the research described here for the development of EU studies. First, on a national scale, its theoretical reflection and innovative methodological approach could encourage other researchers to respond to the constructivist claims presented in the project and thus stimulate academic debate. Second, verification of rationalist assumption that non-material, ideational factors can be excluded from analysis and explanation of decision-making in EU institutions, might lead to more interest in these factors. Third, developing a deeper understanding of the consequences of the multi-layered structure of the Council could lead to a more insightful analysis of other EU institutions, taking into account the intra-institutional interactions which were previously disregarded.

More generally, some aspects of my research might also be important for research undertaken in other subdisciplines of political science, and even other disciplines of humanities and social science, mostly due to its non-rationalist assumptions about social interactions, especially if the results support the role of identity and learning in the functioning of political institutions. On the other hand, if the hypothesis is verified negatively, and no direct link between socialisation and decision-making is found, the results will strengthen the rational choice theory, which is applied throughout social science, indirectly proving its explanatory power.

The democratic legitimacy of European decision-making is one of the contested issues in contemporary EU studies. Results presented in the thesis might weaken a ra-

⁷ A. Wiener, T. Diez, *Taking Stock of Integration Theory*, in: *European Integration Theory*, A. Wiener, T. Diez (eds.), Oxford 2009, p. 245.

tional-choice claim that formation of (national) preferences is exogenous to the decision-making process in the Council, showing that socialisation, and possibly other factors make the preference formation endogenous. Therefore, legitimacy characteristic of international organisation could not be deemed sufficient for the European Union. If the results show otherwise, they will support the view that indirect legitimacy is strong enough for the EU, assuming the member states legitimacy is not questioned.

Innovativeness of the approach

Decision-making is one of the core topics in EU studies⁸. Attempting to understand the course and explain the outcomes of the decision-making process in the Council of the European Union is therefore an ongoing problem with a substantial body of research devoted to it⁹. The same is true for the problem of (international) institutional socialisation, which has been an important subject in English-language literature for some time¹⁰.

The conditions and mechanisms of socialisation were analysed to an extent large enough to go further and change the focus of research to another stage: the links between socialisation and behaviour of socialised individuals, including the decisions taken by them within institutional settings. The main empirical question of my research is thus how socialisation might influence the decision-making in the Council. While there have been publications related to this issue, little effort has been put into identifying the mechanisms behind observed influence, it can therefore be considered a new problem.

Another element of the dissertation which constitutes a new perspective is the emphasis placed on the multi-layered structure of the Council of the EU. I aim to analyse and compare all the layers present in the Council. Three of them can be easily distinguished: ministerial configurations, COREPER(s), working parties and committees¹¹. Many of the previous publications on decision-making limited their scope to one of those layers, or underestimated the differences between them, so comparing and syn-

⁸ A. Niemann, *Explaining Decisions in the European Union*, Cambridge 2010; R. Thomson, F.N. Stokman, C.H. Achen, T. König, *The European Union Decides*, Cambridge 2006.

⁹ F.M. Häge, *Decision-Making in the Council of the European Union: The Role of Committees*, Leiden 2008.

¹⁰ J.T. Checkel, *International Institutions and Socialization in Europe*, Cambridge 2007.

¹¹ F. Hayes-Renshaw, H. Wallace, *The Council of Ministers*, Basingstoke 2006.

thesising their findings will enrich my research and form a foundation for my own empirical inquiry.

Constructivist approach implies the verification of the established rationalist and materialist views. Testing the hypothesis could weaken the main rational-choice assumption that actors make decisions by calculating costs and benefits of possible actions, as it might prove the existence of other mechanisms, which do not fit this instrumental logic, but affect the process of decision-making. Moreover, the view that preferences formed exogenously and fixed – one of the tenets of rational choice approach – could be challenged by results showing how the ideas actors have about their interest are formed and changed within the institutional setting. Finally, stressing the importance of ideas, social norms and identity denies the materialist claim that economic interests matter the most in decision-making and preference formation in the EU.

On a different level, the seemingly obvious assumption that the Council of the European Union is an intergovernmental institution could also be challenged. The multi-layered structure of the Council and socialisation of its officials might justify viewing the Council of the EU as partly supranational.

There are at least two other areas, where the thesis might indirectly contribute to the verification of the current state of knowledge. First, by analysing the effects of socialisation in different layers of the Council, some insights into the socialisation itself could be offered, supporting or challenging previous research. Second, the observed phenomenon of Council decisions being gradually depoliticised (more of them are taken in the lower, bureaucratic layers) was so far explained from a rationalist vantage point. The results of my research might help verify these explanations.

Structure of the thesis

Main empirical and theoretical aims of the research can be divided into several specific steps, which in turn correspond to the plan of the thesis. The first one is conducting a critical review of the constructivist paradigm in EU studies and comparing it with the view rationalist. The second is analysing the multi-layered structure of the Council of the EU and its role in the decision-making in the European Union. The third step includes comparing different modes of negotiation present in the Council, building on the negotiation theory. These steps could be called preparatory, as they prepare a relevant theoretical foundation for the empirical part of the research.

The fourth step of my research is the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the socialisation influence on decision making, i.e. hypothesised causal mechanisms that will be traced via process-tracing method. The next one is determining which mechanisms link socialisation to the course and results of the decision-making process in the Council, and explaining how they do this. This constitutes the core of the empirical part of the project. Generalising results, assessing the usefulness of constructivism and drawing conclusions on the practical dimension of accepting or refuting a constructivist explanation of the decision-making in the Council constitute the sixth and final step.

Plan of the thesis, divided into introduction, five chapters, and conclusions, directly corresponds to these objectives. The first chapter, entitled “Constructivism in European Union Studies”, comprises of two sections, one dealing with meta-theoretical differences between rationalist and constructivist paradigms, and the other comparing main strands of constructivism and conceptualising the constructivist approach to institutions applied in the thesis.

Two sections of the second chapter describe the multi-layered structure of the Council of the European Union and its role in the political system of the EU, especially its importance in the EU decision-making. The next chapter shows how there are different modes of negotiations in the Council of the EU: bargaining, problem-solving and genuine debate. The first section conceptualises this modes within the negotiation theory, while the second applies this theoretical framework to the multi-layered Council.

The fourth chapter provides, in its first section, a review of the international socialisation research. Then, in the second section, socialisation mechanisms are conceptualised, taking into account what has been established in previous chapters. In the fifth chapter, these mechanisms are operationalised and their observable implications traced using the process-tracing method. Conclusions deal with matters described above as the sixth step of the research.

Research methods

I adopt a qualitative methodology in my dissertation. This decision is consistent with the constructivist theoretical approach. Because the research deals with issues and variables difficult to quantify, like identity or ideas, quantitative methods seem inappropriate. This perception is shared by most constructivists.

The most important method used in the research to achieve its objectives is process-tracing¹². It will be used to test the hypothesis regarding the influence of socialisation on the decision-making in the Council of the EU. Quantitative methods are widely used to search for causal relations, but there are some aspects of causality they miss. Process tracing attempts to “identify the intervening causal process – the causal chain and causal mechanism – between an independent variable (or variables) and the outcome of the dependent variable”¹³. Thus, the method not only serves to establish whether a hypothesised causal link exists, but also how exactly and under which circumstances the causation occurs. The importance of causal mechanism for the project has been stressed in previous sections.

Process-tracing is often described as a method which allows researcher not only to test theories (deductively), but to develop them as well (inductively). Here, this quality of the method entails a possibility that, apart from testing the main research hypothesis, unexpected mechanisms influencing decision-making in the Council of the European Union could be identified, especially those related to ideas, norms and identities.

Due to the amount of data needed for process-tracing, several means of data collection and analysis will be required. This includes conducting, transcribing and interpreting interviews, document analysis and desk research of secondary sources, especially interviews and observations related to the decision-making or socialisation in the Council, conducted by other researchers.

The interviewees will belong to two groups: employees of the Council secretariat, who observe and support the negotiations, and representatives of the member states, who actively take part in them. They will be chosen from those involved in selected cases, while the case selection will be based on preliminary archive search.

Other methods are necessary during the preparatory steps of the research. The first chapter of the thesis will focus on the exploration of constructivist and other theoretical and meta-theoretical literature in the form of narrative literature review. Systemic analysis will be implemented in the second chapter. Critical literature review, i.e. careful examination of literature, conducted in a structured fashion, is crucial for the third and fourth chapters, especially for the conceptualisation of causal mechanisms. This method will be also useful to generalise results, and as-

¹² Confer: K. Ławniczak, *Process tracing. Śledzenie mechanizmów przyczynowych*, in: *Metody jakościowe i ilościowe w badaniu organizacji i działania Unii Europejskiej*, K. Ławniczak (red.), Warszawa 2013, forthcoming.

¹³ A.L. George, A. Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, London 2005, p. 206.

sess the constructivist approach usefulness for EU studies. All of these methods will rely on desk research.

Conclusions

American philosopher Richard Rorty wrote that “scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes”¹⁴. My thesis embraces this thought in the hope of offering a description of the decision-making in the Council that enriches our understanding of this process.

European Union studies frequently focus on the legal aspects of the functioning of the EU institutions, with complex (and often informal) intra-institutional interactions considered less closely. Decision-making research, dominated by the rational choice theory, is mostly concerned with material factors, voting weights and strategic calculation behind coalition formation.

The doctoral dissertation presented here attempts to take ideational factors into account and tries to verify the relevance of socialisation to the decision-making process in the multi-layered Council of the European Union. It stresses how important it is to engage into in-depth theoretical reflection and make conscious meta-theoretical choices, and shows how advanced qualitative methods, such as process-tracing, might serve to test hypotheses and develop theories.

Cele i ramy metodologiczne rozprawy doktorskiej „Podejmowanie decyzji w Radzie Unii Europejskiej z perspektywy konstruktywistycznej”

Abstract

Providing an explanation of the decision-making process in the European Union, and especially in one of its main institutions, the Council of the EU, is one of the most

¹⁴ R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge 1989, p. 4.

important aims of European/EU studies. Applying a constructivist approach to this issue places the focus on non-material factors, like ideas, informal norms or identities. Constructivists emphasise the importance of institutional socialisation, i.e. adopting common values, norms, etc. by actors engaged in interactions within (international) institutional settings. The main research objective of the dissertation described here is to verify this claim, i.e. support or deny socialisation influence on the course and outcomes of the decision-making in the Council. It will also aim to evaluate the usefulness of the constructivist approach in EU studies.

Keywords: *decision-making, Council of Ministers, constructivism, socialisation, institutionalism*

Streszczenie

Jednym z ważniejszych wyzwań stojących przed studiami europejskimi jest wyjaśnienie procesu podejmowania decyzji w Unii Europejskiej, w tym zwłaszcza w jednej z jej głównych instytucji, jaką jest Rada UE. Zastosowanie do tej problematyki podejścia konstruktywistycznego zwraca uwagę na czynniki niematerialne, takie jak idee, normy nieformalne czy tożsamości. Konstruktywiści kładą szczególny nacisk na znaczenie socjalizacji, czyli przyjmowania przez aktorów funkcjonujących w (międzynarodowym) otoczeniu instytucjonalnym pewnych wspólnych wartości, reguł postępowania itp. Podstawowym celem badawczym omawianej tu rozprawy jest weryfikacja tego stanowiska, poprzez zbadanie wpływu socjalizacji na przebieg i rezultaty podejmowania decyzji w Radzie. Przyczyni się ona również do określenia na ile użyteczne może być podejście konstruktywistyczne w studiach nad Unią Europejską.

Słowa kluczowe: *podejmowanie Decyzji, Rada Unii Europejskiej, konstruktywizm, socjalizacja, instytucjonalizm*