



**Call for papers**

**(Self-)Legitimation of International Organizations in  
Disruptive Times**

**Workshop at the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies**

**Hamburg, 10-11 December 2020**

*Convened by Tobias Lenz (Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany) and Fredrik Söderbaum (University of Gothenburg, Sweden) in cooperation with the GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Hamburg, Germany*

Despite the diversification of international cooperation, international organizations (IOs) continue to stand out as the most durable and authoritative forms of international governance. Since the end of World War Two, not only has their number increased enormously, many IOs have also grown in their independence from member state control. They have extended the delegation of competences to independent bodies such as secretariats and courts, and they have pooled decision-making competence in collective bodies, ceding the national veto (Hooghe, Lenz, and Marks 2019). Today, many IOs render binding decisions in the expectation of obedience – that is, they hold political authority.

Following Max Weber, political authority rests on the voluntary recognition on the part of the ruled that a political system has the right to take binding decisions because they believe that the system is legitimate. A system is perceived as legitimate when its key features – such as its procedures, purpose or performance – align with the norms and beliefs of important organizational audiences (Beetham 1991, Lenz and Viola 2017). Legitimacy is critical for any political organization because it lowers the cost of rule and enhances the likelihood of compliance. It is particularly important for IOs because they generally lack coercive

enforcement mechanisms and are constantly confronted with the potential for utility losses (Hurd 1999; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Given the importance of legitimacy for political rule, Weber (1978, 213) expected that any political system would seek “to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy.” We refer to strategic acts that aim at stabilizing and enhancing beliefs in the legitimacy of an IO as legitimation – the act of claiming legitimacy. Legitimation may be advanced both by an IO’s bureaucracy or member state principals and may take different forms, including discursive, institutional and behavioural legitimation (Bäckstrand and Söderbaum 2018, Gronau and Schmidtke 2016).

Yet, shifting structural conditions and contemporary political developments render the legitimacy of IOs particularly precarious and legitimation, therefore, especially challenging. We aim to advance a new research agenda on the (self-)legitimation of IOs in disruptive times that gives due regard to the following developments. Structurally, IOs overwhelmingly lack an important source of legitimacy of national political systems: an established self-understanding among the ruled that its members share a common identity. This sense of community is much thinner in the international compared to the domestic realm (Hooghe, Lenz and Marks 2019), and this implies that IO actors have to construct community in a different way or draw on alternative sources in order to claim legitimacy. Democratic legitimacy, which constitutes the main focus in the extant literature, may serve as the basis for a community narrative in Western-dominated regional and global organizations, but IO (self-)legitimation may have different roots elsewhere (Ambrosio 2008, Söderbaum 2004, Witt 2019). In any case, the existing literature’s focus on democratic legitimacy masks potential differences between international and regional organizations.

Moreover, IOs operate in an ever-denser institutional environment in which claims to govern an issue increasingly overlap among different IOs as well as between IOs and other international “governors” (Alter and Raustalia 2018). As a result, competition over who holds (how much) political authority is not only contested between IOs and their member states, as it always has been, but to a growing degree also among international institutions themselves. This development may induce new IO legitimation strategies, such as an explicit differentiation of their legitimacy claims from those of competitors or the collective legitimation of IO complexes. In any case, institutional complexity gives rise to interactions between the (self-)legitimation of different IOs that has gone largely unnoticed in the literature.

Politically, the functional justification for IOs, namely that they are indispensable for transnational problem-solving in an ever more globalized world, is increasingly being challenged by domestic political actors. The return of “populist nationalism” renders this hitherto largely uncontested justification of international authority transfers increasingly problematic, including in the core of the Western-dominated liberal world order (Copelovitch and Pevehouse 2019, Zürn 2018). Yet, the literature offers little insight on what replaces this well-established justification, and to what extent it has ever dominated in non-Western dominated IOs.

This workshop gathers scholars that are interested in tackling this research agenda by studying the practices, processes and politics of IO (self-)legitimation in a changing political context. We invite papers that use a variety of methods, data and theoretical approaches in

order to examine the legitimization of a diverse set of IOs, including regional and global, task specific and general purpose ones. We especially welcome papers that contribute to answering one or more of the following research questions:

1. How do IOs claim legitimacy in the absence of settled “international identities”? What norms and values held by organizational audiences do IOs draw on in order to craft acts of legitimization? Under which conditions do IOs use discursive, institutional and behavioural strategies in order to foster audiences’ beliefs in their legitimacy?
2. How does legitimization vary across different organizational actors, such as IO bureaucracies and member states, and across different IO audiences? What explains such variation?
3. How have practices of (self-)legitimation changed over time and why? Who has contested established legitimacy claims and for what reasons? In what ways has the growing density of international institutions changed IOs’ legitimacy claims?
4. To what extent and in what ways do practices of (self-)legitimation respond to, and seek to incorporate, critique? How is the recent backlash against “liberal internationalism” reflected in the legitimization of IOs?
5. Are the (changing) practices of IO legitimization successful? Do they contribute to silencing critique and co-opting critics? To what extent have (changing) legitimization practices enabled IOs to survive and prosper?

The workshop is intended as a **preparatory meeting for the submission of a special issue proposal** to a peer-reviewed academic journal in the spring of 2021. Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered within the limits of the applying regulations. Scholars who form part of the proposal will be invited to a follow-up workshop in Gothenburg in the summer of 2021.

Proposal submissions, assembled in **one PDF document**, consist of two parts:

- an **abstract** of around **500 words**
- a **short biographical note** with information on your institutional affiliation and relevant ongoing research projects and/or publications.

Please submit proposals to Tobias Lenz and Fredrik Söderbaum at [legro@giga-hamburg.de](mailto:legro@giga-hamburg.de) by **15 May 2020**. Scholars will be informed of the outcome of the selection process by early June 2020. Invited paper-givers are expected to submit their paper by 26 November 2020.

## References

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