

Survival politics

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Impact paragraph

This dissertation analyses how IOs behave when they face existential crises. IOs are the backbone of societies' efforts to address global transnational issues, including climate change, human rights, conflict, or migration and refugee movements. Since the end of the Cold War, IOs from across the policy spectrum have become more authoritative and intrusive in domestic politics. In parallel, however, both states and civil society actors increasingly contest the authority of IOs and the very principles underlying multilateral cooperation. Amid this crisis of multilateralism, the dissertation seeks to understand how IOs themselves respond when their continued existence comes under threat. Most scholarly accounts focus on external factors in explaining whether IOs decline, die, or prosper. The findings of this dissertation on the outsized influence of IOs themselves not only challenge this prevalent view but also carry significant wider scientific and social consequences.

The primary objective of this dissertation is to understand how and with what consequences IOs behave in existential crises. Accounts on the *causes* of the crisis of the multilateral order abound, but scholars have paid strikingly little attention to the *consequences* for and *responses* by IOs themselves. This omission reflects a persistent trend in the discipline of international relations of considering IOs as largely irrelevant actors in their own right. But some IOs have powerful resources, levers of influence, external supporters, and officials who identify with the organisation and whose career depends on the IO's continued existence. Hence, there is no inherent reason why IOs, just like other actors, would not actively seek to survive. Indeed, the empirical findings suggest that IOs go above and beyond existing scripts in existential crises. Senior officials regularly engaged in extraordinary behaviour both in degree and kind. They used innovative institutional designs of negotiation teams, emancipated themselves from and even opposed previous patrons, engaged in previously unthinkable forms of overt and political agenda-setting, or publicly confronted perceived challenger IOs. The dissertation shows that due to this extraordinary behaviour, officials had a much greater than widely expected impact on the outcomes of the crises. In two cases – the Commission's handling of the Brexit negotiations and NATO officials' Trump management – officials decisively shaped what were history-making events of enormous political consequence.

In doing so, the dissertation aspires to make several scientific contributions. The five case studies advance scholarly understanding of the respective crises, as extant accounts had overlooked the role of officials. Each of the studies demonstrate that without accounting for the responses by the IOs, the crises cannot be fully understood. But contributions are not limited to providing novel empirical insights. The findings should revise how scholars think about IOs generally; namely as potentially powerful agents in international relations rather than mere pawns. The findings should also further specific research agendas on bureaucratic politics, international crisis management, and the agency-structure debate. Above all, the dissertation seeks to open an entirely new research agenda by coining the concept of *IO Survival Politics*. It develops a general definition of the new concept, an analytical framework that is applicable

beyond the selected cases, and tentative theoretical propositions that can form the basis for future research.

These findings also carry at least three important implications for policymakers. First, the dissertation underlines the importance of selecting the most suited candidate for senior leadership positions in IOs. As the examples of Jens Stoltenberg and Michel Barnier underline, individual leaders can tip the scales in highly contingent moments. But contemporary appointment practices often resemble horse-trading exercises, whereby national background often plays the most important role. Policymakers should heed the lessons of recent episodes of contestation to shore up IOs resilience by appointing senior officials based on merit, not parochial concerns. Second, the analysis also emphasises that IO Survival Politics is only a temporary remedy for the crisis of multilateralism. What officials can do is to help the IO survive the threat in the short term to buy time for more substantial reforms to address the causes of the malaise. But institutional actors cannot be expected to enact such reforms required to address, for instance, decades-long debates about transatlantic burden-sharing, greater representation of stakeholders from the Global South in multilateral institutions, or the future principles of the European security order. Policymakers should not complacently infer that IOs are inherently resilient. And third, the findings of significant agency on part of officials raises concerns about democratic accountability and participation because the influence of senior officials exacerbates existing democratic deficits in global governance. But for the multilateral order to survive, it needs greater inclusivity and ownership by actors beyond the West, not unaccountable exclusivity. Policymakers should work to make IOs more inclusive and accountable to address some of the roots of the crisis of multilateralism.

My research results are relevant for three audiences. First, the findings speak to researchers who work on IOs, multilateralism, bureaucratic politics, and agency and structure, as well as scholars working on the EU, NATO, and the OSCE. The dissertation aims to fill important gaps in the scholarly literature and seeks to advance a new research agenda on IO Survival Politics. Second, the insights should also matter to policymakers inside and outside IOs. For IO officials as well as national policymakers, the dissertation should generate a better understanding of the factors shaping the crisis of multilateralism. IO officials could learn from the empirical cases on how to best help the IO to survive. National policymakers, in turn, are best positioned to heed the political and normative implications of IO Survival Politics. Finally, my dissertation speaks to interested citizens. The fate of IOs and the wider multilateral order has concrete consequences for public life as IOs are instrumental in addressing manifold societal challenges. A failure to reach a withdrawal agreement with the UK, to take just one example, would have had tangible economic and legal consequences for millions of EU (and UK) citizens. Moreover, the significant power exerted by key officials should also be a cause for citizens concerned about the democratic accountability of IOs.

The dissemination of my research results has been tailored to each of these three target groups. To engage with the scholarly community, I have published three of the case studies in peer-reviewed journals of international repute, with three more articles currently under review. Indeed, my article on NATO and Trump published in *International Affairs* already enjoys one

of the highest attention scores of all the journal's outputs. I have also presented my PhD research at thirteen international conferences and workshops. Moreover, I have given lectures on the Commission during the Brexit negotiations to Master students at Maastricht University and on Secretary-General Stoltenberg's Trump Management to Master students at Johns Hopkins University. Finally, I co-organised a workshop in May 2022 at the University of Oxford, which brought together academics, think tankers, and officials to discuss NATO's future trajectory.

To venture beyond the academy, I have also written several policy briefs and commentaries targeted at policymakers that spun off my research. The briefs all formulated policy recommendations for decision-makers and covered the Brexit negotiations (for the European Policy Centre), transatlantic relations (for the Centre for European Reform), EU-NATO relations (for *Atlantisch Perspectief*), and NATO reform (for the Egmont Institute). My commentaries related to among others the Brexit negotiations (published in *The Times*), transatlantic relations (*Tagesspiegel*), Trump's NATO legacy (*Internationale Politik Quarterly*), and NATO reform (*Encompass Europe*).

And finally, I have sought to communicate my research to interested citizens. I have spoken about my work on transatlantic relations at two public events hosted by the Centre for European Reform and the Danish Institute for International Studies. I have given interviews to German, Swiss, and Swedish radio broadcasters. I have recorded a podcast with Chatham House and written a blog for the widely read *Duck of Minerva*. Using my expertise on EU foreign policy, I also acted as external expert for a citizens' panel during the Conference on the Future of Europe. My work has been discussed in the Norwegian daily *Aftenposten*, the British magazine *New Statesman*, and the German daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, and is cited on two *Wikipedia* pages. Last, I actively use Twitter to communicate my findings to wider audiences. Through these various dissemination efforts, I hope to initiate scholarly, policy, and political debates about IO Survival Politics and the significant wider consequences of this distinct type of IO behaviour.