

How Useful is Europeanisation in Explaining EU and Member State Relations?

Written by Haoyu Zhai

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In recent years Europeanisation has become a major research agenda for EU scholars (Börzel and Panke, 2013: 116-7). As its main analytical focus has been on the interactions between the EU and its member states (Börzel, 2005: 46), it is worth examining its utility in explaining the relationship between the two. This essay argues that Europeanisation is a useful but limited concept in explaining the relationship between the EU and its member states: it is useful in explaining (1) the EU's impact on its member states and (2) the member states' impact on the EU, but not very useful in explaining (3) the power balance between the EU and its member states or (4) changes in the Community-member states relationship due to non-EU factors. The structure of the essay is as follows: first, the concept of Europeanisation will be defined and discussed; next, its two useful aspects (1) and (2) will be analysed; and last, its two less or not useful aspects (3) and (4) will be examined. This essay does not consider research on Europeanisation of third (non-member) states as it is mostly irrelevant to the question addressed here

Concept of Europeanisation

This essay defines Europeanisation as a concept that refers to the interactions between the EU and its member states. Review of the literature suggests that the concept has been used to describe and analyse at least three aspects of such interaction: first, the domestic impact of the Union on its member states, known as 'top-down' Europeanisation; second, the role of member states in EU level policy-making and institutional development, referred to as 'bottom-up' Europeanisation; and third, 'sequential' Europeanisation, namely the interactive influence of the EU and its member states on each other (Börzel and Panke, 2013: 116-123; Börzel and Risse, 2006: 484-5; Ladrech, 2004: 47; Radaelli, 2006: 58-9). In addition, two main approaches have been developed to study the mechanisms and consequences of Europeanisation: the rationalist approach, which explains domestic and EU level change as caused by states' rational adaptation to the policy and institutional 'misfits' (differences) between the Union and its member countries; and the constructivist approach, which interprets such change as the result of the development of shared norms and values among European and national actors through socialisation (Börzel, 2005: 49-58; Börzel and Panke, 2013: 118-22). Furthermore, the concept does not necessarily imply a converging, homogenising process among member states, as research have often shown that the outcome of Europeanisation tends to differ across countries and sectors (Knill, 2001: 227; Wiener, 2006: 48).

Hence the concept of Europeanisation has three main features: one, that it refers to all directions of interactions between the EU and its member states; two, that it concerns both rational and social processes; three, that it does not always result in convergence among the member states. Thus it is a broad concept which concerns many aspects of the relations between the Community and its constituent states, and should be at least useful in explaining some aspects of the two's relationship. The next two sections analyse the concept's utility in capturing this relationship.

Utility

In general, the concept of Europeanisation is most useful in explaining two aspects of the relationship between the EU and its member states: (1) the EU's impact on the member states and (2) the members' impact on the Union. By

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'impact' is meant changes in policies, politics and polities at the EU and national levels as a result of the integration process, often in the form of the development of new policies and institutions (Börzel and Risse, 2006: 486-88; Tömmel, 2014: 236). Europeanisation has proven to be a good conceptual instrument in understanding such top-down and bottom-up impact.

On the one hand, it has been useful in analysing the EU's impact on its member states. For many years the continued process of European integration has led to EU-induced changes in the domestic politics of its member states, in terms of their institutions, policy styles and political processes (Börzel and Panke, 2013: 117). This is seen, for instance, in the creation of new para-public agencies in Greece and Portugal to manage EU-allocated structural funds (Hibou, 2005: 243) and the pro-regulation shift in the UK's environmental policy under the impact of the EU's environmental action programmes (Allen, 2005: 137). Europeanisation literature has approached the study of such top-down impact in two ways: the rationalist and the constructivist, and has given detailed accounts of the mechanisms of EU-triggered domestic impact (Börzel and Risse, 2006: 490-3). Christopher Knill's study (2001) offers a particularly good demonstration of the concept's utility in this aspect.

In his comparative study of the Europeanisation of the national administrations, Knill (2001) employed both rationalist and constructivist approaches to analyse the EU's top-down impact on its member states. Using a rationalist approach, he showed that the misfit between national and European policies and institutions served as the Europeanising mechanism in member states' adaptation to EU haulage liberalisation policy: already liberalised countries like Britain experienced few changes in this sector since the existing degree of misfit was low and caused little adaptation pressure, while countries like Germany underwent major pro-market reforms given the large misfit between its existing interventionist regime and EU policy in the sector. Using a constructivist approach, Knill also demonstrated that EU-promoted socialising processes of development of shared beliefs and values acted as the Europeanising mechanism in EU railways liberalisation policy: the Commission's 1991 Directive successfully framed EU liberalising programmes as complementary not contradictory to national railways reforms, and thus triggered EU-wide railways liberalisation among many member states. Hence as Knill's research demonstrates, Europeanisation is a useful concept in explaining the top-down impact of the EU on its member states, with considerable utility in understanding the causes and mechanisms of such impact.

On the other hand the concept also proves useful in studying the member states' impact on the EU. Apart from internalising EU-given impact, member states also shape the Community's policy output, institutional structure and political process (Radaelli, 2006: 60-1). For example, Ireland, the UK and Denmark successfully increased their fishing quotas in EU fisheries policy (da Conceição-Heldt, in Börzel and Panke, 2013: 122). Again, Europeanisation studies have explained the mechanism of this bottom-up effect from a rationalist and a constructivist perspective: the rationalist approach attributes this to national governments' rational pursuit of national interests by strategic bargaining in EU-level negotiations and the constructivist approach focuses on states' use of persuasion and policy networks (Wallace, 2005: 36-43). The utility of Europeanisation in this aspect could be best demonstrated by Egeberg's study (2005) of Denmark and Sweden.

In his study Egeberg (2005) analysed the relative success of the two Nordic member states in shaping EU policy. Despite being comparatively small, Denmark and Sweden have had some appreciable achievements in shaping EU environmental and employment policies, with over 50% of their most EU-affected ministries and departments reporting 'substantial' influence on EU policy-making (Emark, in Egeberg, 2005: 196). The author offered both rationalist and constructivist explanations: from a rationalist perspective the two states, especially Denmark, has been a member for many years and has acquired considerable knowledge and experience on the working of the EU system, which became an advantageous asset in intra-EU bargaining; from a constructivist perspective the formation of personal and informal networks with Commission officials also gave the two countries greater persuasive capacities vis-à-vis EU-member states interactions. Therefore as this study shows, the concept of Europeanisation is useful in analysing the bottom-up aspect of the Union-states relationship. And as the sequential approach is essentially a combination of the top-down and bottom-up approaches, it would be useful in both aspects. Thus, the concept of Europeanisation is useful in explaining two main aspects of the relationship between the EU and its member states: (1) the EU's impact on the member states and (2) the member states' impact on the EU. But it still has some limits in understanding this relationship, which are to be examined in the next section.

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Limits

The two main areas where the concept of Europeanisation is less or not useful in studying the Community-member states relationship are (3) the power balance between the EU and its member states and (4) changes in the Community-member states relationship due to non-EU factors. Concerning aspect (3), because the Europeanisation concept focuses on the interaction between the Union and the member states, especially the mechanisms and consequences of the two's impact on each other, it tends to prioritise the analysis of effect over power balance. By power balance here is meant the distribution of policy competences among the Community and the states in the EU system, most especially between the Community institutions like the European Commission and those representing the member states like the EU Council (Warleigh-Lack and Drachenberg, 2013: 200-1). These are often better analysed by integration theories, which focus more on the power transfer and distribution between the EU and the members in the integration process (Bache, George and Bulmer, 2011: 8-14) and thus are more useful in explaining intra-EU power balance.

This limit is seen, for instance, in the study of EU environmental policy making. As Bache, George and Bulmer (2011) have shown, Europeanisation literature mostly focuses on how member states with different policy preferences attempted to influence EU-level policy decisions in their favour, but not how much power the main institutions involved enjoyed or how such power balance affected the policy-making process. By contrast, integration theories addressed these issues, with liberal intergovernmentalism emphasising the continued dominance by the member states through unanimity voting in areas such as taxation and energy use, and neofunctionalism emphasizing the entrepreneurial role of the Commission to increase its competence in this sector (2011: 460-2). This shows that Europeanisation is not very useful in explaining the power balance between the EU and its member states, especially compared with integration theories; this constitutes a major limit of the concept.

In addition, the concept is not useful in explaining changes in EU-member states relationship due to non-EU factors either. This is because Europeanisation by its very ontological assumption attributes changes in EU-members relationship to the effect of endogenous, intra-EU factors, namely the interactions between the Union and its member states within the EU system, but not exogenous, non-EU factors such as globalisation. To illustrate, Europeanisation studies have often explained European telecommunication market liberalisation as the result of EU liberalisation policy; but this, as George and Bache (2001: 28) pointed out, ignored the external impact of globalisation: at the time, earlier telecommunication liberalisation in the US and politico-economic pressure from the American government put much pressure on European companies and governments to push for market opening in telecommunication sector. Thus although changes had occurred in the EU-member states relationship, in terms of the creation of a common telecommunication market with increased sectorial competence of the Community, these changes were triggered by the external factor of globalisation, rather than the interactions between the EU and its members. Accordingly, the concept of Europeanisation is not useful in analysing changes in the Community-member states relationship due to non-EU factors. Taken together, this section has therefore shown the two major limits of Europeanisation in explaining the EU-member states relationship: the power balance between the EU and its member states and changes in the Community-member states relationship due to non-EU factors.

Conclusion

This essay has examined the usefulness of the concept of Europeanisation in explaining the relationship between the EU and its member states. It has argued and demonstrated that the concept is useful but limited in explaining the relationship between the two: it is useful in explaining (1) the EU's impact on its member states and (2) the member states' impact on the EU, but not very useful in explaining (3) the power balance between the EU and its member states or (4) changes in the Community-member states relationship due to non-EU factors. It is thus recommended that when using the concept of Europeanisation to analyse the EU-member states relationship, researchers should avoid its usage in aspects (3) or (4).

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