



EUPLEX – Coping with Policy Complexity in the European Union

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Project summary

Policy contents are characterized by increasing complexity. On the one hand, regulations and directives accumulate over time, creating interdependencies between new and existing law. On the other hand, legislation has become increasingly differentiated in order to take into account the rising complexity of political, social and economic scope conditions. While the relevance of these developments is hardly considered controversial in public and academic discourses, we know surprisingly little about their causes and consequences. This is to a large extent due to the fact that we have been lacking the conceptual and theoretical foundations necessary for a systematic assessment of policy complexity.

Focusing on regulations and directives of the European Union (EU) in the time period 2004-2019, the EUPLEX project aims to close these research gaps. Specifically, the project addresses the following central research questions: (1) How can we capture the complexity of policy content conceptually, measure it empirically and thereby make it comparable systematically? (2) Which factors account for varying degrees of policy complexity and which comparable relevance can we ascribe to functional, political and institutional determinants? (3) How does policy complexity impact on the efficiency of decision-making processes and the quality of policy implementation?

EUPLEX makes the assumption that policy complexity emerges out of the interaction between policy elements and distinguishes between external policy complexity (interdependencies between laws) and internal policy complexity (interdependencies within laws). This innovative approach enables nuanced theory building on the core research questions of the project. EUPLEX pursues a mixed-methods approach, which is based both on the collection and analysis of quantitative network data and the tracing of causal mechanisms through in-depth interviews with key decision-makers and implementers. The project builds upon first descriptive studies on policy complexity in IT and law, but refines these existing approaches in conceptual and theoretical terms in order to make them accessible for policy analysis.

Answers to the central research questions of EUPLEX are of outstanding theoretical relevance for EU research, which has hitherto been focusing firmly on the role of political and institutional factors, while largely neglecting the complexity of policy content in its explanatory models. Moreover, the project's overarching question on the problem-solving capacity of political systems in times of increasingly complex challenges assumes great societal relevance.