Editorial: Relations and policymaking across EU actors, national governments, parliaments and parties

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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The governance of the European Union (EU) continues to witness a complex interplay between supranational and intergovernmental institutions, national governments, parliaments, and political parties (Jachtenfuchs, 1997), making up an institutionalized multi-level governance system (Piattoni, 2009). Not only do various EU and national actors jointly contribute to the day-to-day decision-making across policy areas, but the growing number of EU-level policies requiring domestic implementation has reshaped the constitutional balance of powers between executive and legislative bodies in favor of the former (Capati and Christiansen, 2025), while at the same time EU crises have significantly undermined government stability at the national level (Improta and Mannoni, 2024). As the EU's institutional framework has consolidated and its policy reach deepened over time, so too has the need to better understand the interdependencies and tensions that structure decision-making across levels. The research presented in this Research Topic addresses precisely this challenge, offering new insights into how formal and informal actors interact across national and European arenas, and how such interactions influence processes of political legitimation and competition.

The contributions gathered under this Research Topic reflect a shared interest in unpacking the political and institutional dynamics that connect domestic and supranational levels of governance. From different disciplinary backgrounds and methodological perspectives, the authors examine the mechanisms through which actors—including parties, cities, and interest groups—engage with, contest, or circumvent traditional loci of power. In doing so, they shed light on a number of underexplored aspects of EU policymaking, including the international projection of radical parties, the subnational articulation of global crises, the domestic reverberations of European electoral dynamics, and the strategic behavior of lobbies within the EU policy cycle.

The first article, by Boldrini et al., offers a theoretically innovative and empirically rich analysis of the international strategies pursued by radical right populist parties. Focusing on the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), the authors introduce the concept of 'legitimation from abroad' to describe how these actors seek credibility and recognition

through transnational engagement. Drawing on documentary sources and secondary literature, the article reconstructs the multiple ways in which AUR has attempted to counter domestic delegitimation by fostering connections with European political families, participating in symbolic international events, and establishing networks of ideological affinity. Rather than treating radical parties as isolated or inward-looking phenomena, this study repositions them within broader transnational dynamics that contribute to their consolidation and normalization within national political systems.

Kahil's contribution examines the impact of the 2024 European elections on the French political context. While much scholarship has framed EU elections as second-order contests (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), this article suggests that such contests may, under certain conditions, act as catalysts for domestic political realignment. Through a qualitative comparative approach, the study analyses how the growing presence of populist forces in the European Parliament has reverberated within national political competition, affecting discursive frames and institutional agendas. The paper draws particular attention to the evolving role of Eurocentrism as a structuring dimension of party positioning and inter-institutional coordination in France. The article enriches our understanding of how electoral processes at the EU level interact with domestic partisan configurations and public discourse, raising important questions about the boundaries between European and national politics.

In a different yet complementary perspective, the article by Valeriani et al. turns to the role of cities as international actors in times of crisis. Focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors analyse how urban administrations engaged in transnational networks to pursue policy objectives independently or in coordination with national governments. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of selected Transnational City Networks (TCNs), the article identifies the conditions under which these platforms succeed in articulating common goals. The study highlights key dimensions such as the bottom-up or top-down nature of the network, the degree of institutionalization, and the relationship with international organizations. By foregrounding the agency of cities, the article offers a valuable contribution to debates on multi-level governance, demonstrating how subnational actors can assume a proactive role in shaping responses to global challenges.

Finally, the article by Serna-Ortega et al. provides a systematic framework for analyzing lobbying strategies across different phases of the EU policy process. Adopting a theoretical approach, the study disaggregates the policy cycle into six stages—from problem definition to policy evaluation—and assesses how the influence of lobbying groups varies across each. Particular attention is given to the distinction between social and economic interests, as well as to the tools employed by different types of lobbies, from grassroots mobilization to direct access to decision-makers. The paper identifies both direct and indirect dimensions of lobbying power, including financial capacity and institutional proximity. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how interest groups interact with the EU's multilevel institutional setting, and how their influence is mediated by context-specific constraints and opportunities.

Taken together, these contributions advance the study of EU governance by foregrounding the strategic behavior of diverse political actors across levels. Rather than focusing solely on formal institutions or codified rules, the articles collected in this Research Topic shed light on the less visible, often informal mechanisms that influence political interactions and policy outcomes in the EU. Whether by mobilizing transnational legitimacy, reframing national debates in light of European developments, activating subnational networks, or exerting influence through lobbying, the actors examined here demonstrate the multiplicity of pathways through which political agency and institutional constraints play out in the EU polity. This is especially relevant in a context of "polycrisis" (Zeitlin et al., 2019) as it has been shown to favor information sharing and exchange of best practices by actors at different levels (Capati, 2023) as well as to affect the composition and nature of domestic institutions, including governments (Improta, 2025).

This Research Topic also invites reflection on the methodological and theoretical challenges associated with the study of multilevel policymaking. The range of methodological approaches adopted—case studies, discourse analysis, qualitative comparative analysis, conceptual analysis—speaks to the richness of the field, but it also underscores the need for continued dialogue across subfields. Moreover, the eclecticism in the analytical and theoretical perspectives embraced by articles in the Research Topic—including external legitimation, eurocentrism, and non-polarity—testifies to the complexity of making sense of relations and policymaking practices across levels and raises fundamental questions about the need to update or refine classical theories of European integration, such as neo-functionalism, liberal intergovernmentalism, new intergovernmentalism and post-functionalism (Schmidt, 2024). Future research could build on these findings to further explore the conditions under which cross-level interactions take place and how they reinforce or undermine democratic accountability and political integration.

In conclusion, the articles presented in this Research Topic contribute to an expanding agenda of research that recognizes the EU not simply as a layered institutional architecture, but as a political system in its own right (Fabbrini, 2010; Hix and Høyland, 2022). By analyzing how actors operate across and within its various levels, this Research Topic offers analytical tools and empirical evidence that will be of interest to scholars of comparative politics, EU studies, public policy, and beyond.

Author contributions

Conflict of interest

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