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Often perceived as boring and technical, the European Union has for a long time attracted the attention of a limited scholarly audience. Their interest in the question of why states integrate has led to predominance in historiography of interstate bargaining, treaties, and institutions. It has also created a blind spot for the deeply political and informal dimensions of the construction of European governance.

This last point is made by Lennaert van Heumen and Mechthild Roos, editors of a volume that seeks to better understand the role of „informality" in European integration history. While acknowledging that historians have engaged with „the informal", here defined as that which is „not regulated by treaties, legislation or any other form of binding agreement" (p. 8), they call for a more explicit conceptualisation of informality and a more systematic assessment of its place in the development and functioning of the European Community/European Union.

The history of the European Union can hardly be understood without taking into account its informal dimension. The European Council, so prominent an institution today, has its origins in the informal practice of government leaders meeting on a regular basis since the mid-1970s. Only many years later would it be included in one of the treaties (the Single European Act). Foreign policy coordination and police cooperation developed from cautious informal initiatives to policies that are now subsumed under the second and third pillar of the European Union. Moreover, if we aim to understand why new issues and priorities appear on the European political agenda, we need to look beyond the purely formal sphere and take into account the wider circulation of ideas among networks of informal actors. In fact, as historian N. Piers Ludlow argues in his chapter in this volume, informality may well be considered the norm rather than the exception for much of the EU's existence.

The topics that the editors range under the overarching theme of informality – ideas, actors and procedures – have been the subject of recent historical scholarship. Especially in the last decade, scholars have expanded the scope of European integration historiography substantially by shifting focus to the role of societal actors, ideas of European unity across longer time spans and in a more global context, the historical development of policy fields, and the transfer and interaction between different international organisations, including those that have contributed to the „hidden integration" of Europe by means of technologies and infrastructures.

In this sense, the volume, which is based on a conference for PhD and postdoctoral researchers organised by the History of European Integration Research Society in 2017, offers an excellent overview of the themes and perspectives that a younger generation of historians and historically interested political scientists are currently working on. The continued focus on the role of informal actors stands out.

Based on ongoing research, Ilaria Zamburlini reports in her chapter how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Amnesty International, the Anti-Slavery Society and the European Movement played a crucial role in the 1970s, when human rights acquired an increasingly central place in foreign aid policies. Long before the rise of new societal actors in the 1970s, Lars Lehmann shows in his chapter on the initiative to establish a supranational European university in the mid-1950s, non-state actors were able to influence policy outcomes without having a formal role in the decision-making process. The idea to establish a supranational university within the framework of Euratom met with severe resistance from rectors of „national" universities who feared a downgrading of their own institutes. Their concerted action and the pressure they put on national ministers led to the abandonment of this project. Paradoxically, Lehmann notes, their resistance to a European university led to a Europeanisation of universities, reflected in the founding of an organisation aimed to vigilantly follow any future initiatives in the

field of higher education. Lola Avril in her chapter on competition policy lays out the ways in which lawyers managed to carve out for themselves a role as intermediaries between the Commission and firms, a role that would eventually be formalised.

In other cases, the degree to which informal actors have been able to shape agenda-setting processes or even influence policy outcomes is more difficult to assess. Several authors in their contributions aim to show that even when such direct linkages are difficult to prove (a preoccupation of his generation, Piers Ludlow retrospectively reflects) or may even be non-existent, it is nonetheless important to see how those ideas that were eventually implemented emerged from a much wider range of possible options discussed at the time.

In this vein, Jorrit Steehouder and Clemens van den Berg study the 1943 memorandum of the Freiburger Bonhoeffer Kreis. They note the centrality of the „family" as the core unit of any political and moral community and see clear parallels with the ordoliberal thought that became predominant in post-war West Germany. In his chapter, Lennaert van Heumen focuses on transatlantic networks of foreign policy elites and analyses discussions about a European versus an Atlantic Union, comprising the entire „Western" world. These informal channels, van Heumen argues, offered a unique opportunity for people to freely float their ideas. Even when many such ideas were not implemented, they forced state actors to more clearly articulate their view on specific issues. For the anti-Francoist opposition researched by Carlo López-Gómez, their setting up of a Spanish branch of the Union of European Federalists primarily served their own political purposes. Rather than engaging themselves with ideals of European political unity, they used all channels available to them to denounce the Francoist dictatorship and put pressure on external actors to not accept a non-democratic Spain among their midst. In doing so, the author argues, they contributed to the affiliation of democracy and Europe that became so widespread in Spain during the transition.

The remaining chapters on the Western European Union (Sara Venditti), the Group of Seven (Andi Shehu) and EU external relations governance (Daniel Schade) underline the importance of simultaneously looking at formal and informal dimensions. Informal gatherings in the framework of the WEU Assembly and the G7 allowed for the discussion of political sensitivities that in other settings more geared towards formal agreements would not be possible. At the same time, the grey area between the formal and the informal caused tensions. While state leaders stressed the informality of G7 talks, their formal and senior role raised high expectations among media and the wider public. Tensions, even bureaucratic turf wars, also emerged in the absence of clearly defined formal roles and responsibilities following the creation of the office of High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Vice-President of the European Commission (HRVP), as Daniel Schade shows.

The editors are to be lauded for their attempt to more explicitly engage with informality and to foster the cross-fertilisation between the historical and political sciences. The shifting away from the question of why states integrate to an analysis of how European governance has developed over time and which factors and actors have shaped this process implies that European integration history and contemporary European history are moving closer to each other. And rightly so, because the wide range of historical actors engaged in this process did not limit themselves to national, European or global arenas but moved across them.

After reading this volume, one is left with a question: if informality takes up such a central role in the history of European integration, what does that mean for our understanding of the EU today? Some political scientists have criticised informal politics for its lack of legitimacy and transparency, while others argue that it increases efficiency and allows for more parties to participate (see the introduction to this volume). Looking at its history, an ambivalent picture emerges. What seems for sure is that the complex and partly informal nature of EU decision-making makes it difficult for many to get a clear picture of its workings, thus diminishing its legitimacy. At the

same time, it is this informality that has probably allowed it to work in the first place.

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