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The EU timescape: from notion to research agenda

Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling and Klaus H. Goetz

ABSTRACT This article outlines how the notion of an EU timescape may be developed into a fruitful research agenda. It sets out central tasks involved, including clarification of the concept of an EU timescape; of the key empirical questions to be asked; and of the status of political time in variable-oriented research. The article illustrates the potential value-added of a time-centred approach to the study of the EU by highlighting temporal issues in EU enlargement, differentiated integration and democratization. It concludes with thoughts on the comparison of democratic timescapes.

KEY WORDS Democratization; differentiated integration; enlargement; EU integration; EU timescape; political time.

THE EU TIMESCAPE: MORE THAN AN ATTENTION-DIRECTING NOTION?

What does it mean to study the EU timescape? The articles collected in this volume offer selective insights into the manner in which political time in the European Union (EU) is institutionalized along the dimensions of polity, politics and public policy. They provide evidence of how political time matters in EU politics, and how scholars may use it as a dependent and independent variable in analyses of diverse aspects of the EU political system. But is there more to the study of political time than the potential to make a series of more or less connected observations about the relevance of time in a range of diverse institutional, decisional and policy settings? If time is seemingly 'everywhere', is there not a danger that its study ends up 'all over the place'? And what, if anything, is to be gained by advancing the notion of an EU timescape? Can it be more than what Johan Olsen (2002), with reference to Europeanization, has called an 'attention-directing device' that encourages scholars of the EU to focus on the importance of time in the EU political system? Does it instead have the potential to serve as what he calls an 'explanatory concept', or, if we are less ambitious, one that may help to guide research and integrate empirical findings?

The following sketches out some of the key tasks that will need to be tackled if we want to advance research on political time in the EU as an empirical research agenda centred around the EU timescape as a potentially integrative concept.

This outline of what needs to be done is interspersed with arguments about why we think such time-centred analysis is a worthwhile undertaking. There are at least four tasks to be tackled: first, clarification of terms and concepts, including ‘political time’, ‘timescape’ and ‘EU timescape’; second, clarification of the empirical phenomena to be described and explained; third, clarification of the analytical status of time in causal arguments; and, finally, illustration of the potential value-added of time-centred research.

CONCEPT, SUBSTANCE AND CAUSATION

Terms and concept

None of the three time-related terms that have been frequently employed in this volume – political time, timescape, and EU timescape – have so far been tightly defined and none is readily operationalizable. Of the three, the term most familiar to political scientists will be ‘political time’. It has been the central focus of Skowronek’s (1993, 2008) work on the American presidency and, within that context, essentially refers to the specific historical-temporal location of a presidency, and the specific challenges, opportunities and constraints with which American presidents have been confronted as a result. By contrast, our usage of the term has not been about locations in historical-political time and the impact of historical time on politics. Rather, we have employed political time as a convenient shorthand for a very diverse range of rules, norms, conventions and understandings that relate to time as a resource and constraint for political institutions and actors; in political decision-making; and in the structuring of public policies.

We have borrowed the notion of a timescape from the sociologist Barbara Adam (1998, 2004, 2008), who defines a timescape as ‘a cluster of temporal features, each implicated in all the others, but not necessarily of equal importance in each instance’ (Adam 2004: 143). Its key elements include time-frames, temporality, timing, tempo, duration, sequence and temporal modalities (past, present, future) (Adam 2008).

To employ this concept of a timescape with specific reference to a political institution or political system – the EU timescape – is attractive for two main reasons. First, as Adam (2008; 1; emphasis in the original) notes, ‘the “scape” part of the concept acknowledges that we cannot embrace time without simultaneously encompassing space and matter ... a *timescape*’s perspective acknowledges this spatiality, materiality and contextuality but foregrounds the temporal side of the interdependency.’ In the context of the EU, this means, in particular, that a time-centred analysis of the EU political system cannot get us very far without paying attention to the substantive issues at the heart of the EU political processes and the partial re-spatialization of politics that European integration entails (Bartolini 2005).

Second, the timescape concept invites a focus on the linkages and interdependencies between different dimensions of the temporal constitution of a political

system. As will be shown in more detail at the end of this article, this point is especially relevant with regard to the combination of temporal features that exist across the polity, politics and policy dimensions of different political timescapes. Adam (2008: 2) argues that when several of these dimensions ‘are brought together we begin to see patterns of rhythmicity, periodicity and cyclicity’. This implies that it is, in principle, both capable of guiding research – as an attention-directing notion – and may help to integrate diverse empirical findings in the sense that it encourages the search for both regularities and interconnections of the varied temporal features of the EU system.

Whilst the EU timescape may serve as an integrative concept, the degree of stability and orderliness in the institutionalization of the temporal features of the EU political system is a matter for empirical observation. Given the material fluidity of the EU system – in terms of institutions, decision-making modes and policies – and its shifting boundaries (both external and internal), the EU timescape is likely to be dynamic rather than static or what Zerubavel (1981) calls ‘rigidified’. Political conflict over deepening and widening does, therefore, inevitably also involve arguments over time. Moreover, there is evidence of distinct *Eigenzeiten* in different policy domains (Dyson 2009), and we must also allow for a degree of randomness and contradiction across temporal arrangements.

Substance

The components of a timescape enumerated by Adam open up a very wide agenda for empirical research. If research on the EU timescape is to benefit from, and contribute to, political science scholarship on political time, it seems advisable to focus, in the first instance, on the three dimensions introduced earlier (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009): terms, time budgets, time horizons and their effects; questions concerning timing, tempo, sequence and duration of decision-making processes and their effects; and the temporal properties of EU policies and their effects. In respect of effects, we suggest that a focus on the implications of time for the distribution of power, system performance and legitimacy will help to ensure that research on the EU timescape can contribute to key debates in the analysis of the EU political system.

Causation

Making causal arguments, preferably based on general theoretical assumptions, is, of course, the Holy Grail of scientific analysis. Much of contemporary research – whether qualitative or quantitative – operates more or less explicitly with research designs based on independent and dependent variables. In this tradition, it is relatively easy to determine the analytical status of political time or the timescape as an independent or a dependent variable – it can obviously be both depending on the question that is asked – and the usual standards and methods for making casual inferences can be employed. In this sense, there is nothing special about political time.

There are, however, at least two issues to which time-centred analysis needs to be especially sensitive. First, there is a propensity in political science accounts of time to include different aspects of time both on the ‘independent’ and the ‘dependent’ variable. For example, arguments about political business cycles link observations about lengths of terms and election timing – independent variable – to temporal properties of policies (e.g. timing, intertemporal trade-offs) – as the dependent variable. In a similar vein, historical institutionalist accounts of institutional and policy development ascribe key explanatory power to temporal categories – such as actors’ time horizons and decisional sequences – in trying to account for developments ‘over time’ (Bulmer 2009). Given the many guises that political time can take, there is, in principle, nothing wrong with time being part of both the explanans and the explanandum, though the dangers for confusion and circularity are real.

Second, as noted above, the close association between political time, political substance, and political space means that it is not easy and, in many instances, not desirable to try to isolate a time-centred cause or effect. For example, analysing the importance of sequences for the success or failure of policy reforms can only yield insights if sequence and substance are considered together (Beyer 2008; Ganghof 2008). Similarly, the impact of politicians’ time budgets and time horizons on substantive policy decisions cannot be assessed without information on substantive policy options and actors’ preferences.

VALUE-ADDED: ASKING QUESTIONS ABOUT EU TIME

What does research that ‘foregrounds’ time have to add to the analysis of the EU? We have already noted how temporal analysis links in with considerations about power, performance and legitimacy. In the following, we offer some illustrative examples of how time-centred analysis ties in with key debates about the EU, including enlargement, differentiated integration and democratization. The questions in Table 1 relate to polity, politics and policy dimensions and, for illustrative purposes, distinguish between political time as a dependent and an independent variable.

Enlargement

EU decision-making is often – rightly or wrongly – perceived as slow and cumbersome, and enlargement has been seen by many as a further threat to the timeliness and expeditiousness with which decisions are made. With the exception of work on legislation (see Kovats 2009, with further references), we still have little systematic data on whether successive enlargements have been accompanied by a slowing down of the Commission, the Council, the European Parliament (EP), or the European Court of Justice. Is König’s (2007) finding of ‘an ever-slowing’ EU legislative process generalizable to other processes – for example, under the open method of co-ordination – making for progressive gridlock or have successive enlargements also entailed successful time-saving innovations?

Table 1 Debates in EU integration and examples of their temporal dimension

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Time as a dependent variable</i>	<i>Time as an independent variable</i>
Enlargement	Does enlargement slow down EU policy-making?	How have actors' time budgets and time horizons affected enlargement decisions?
Differentiated integration	How can we explain temporal aspects of differentiated integration?	Do cycles help to explain differentiated integration?
Democratization	Can the EU 'keep pace' with its economic, social and technological environments?	Do inter-institutional differences in terms, time budgets and time horizons help or hinder deliberative decision-making?

Source: Authors' compilation.

Helen Wallace's (2007) detailed review of scholarship on the impact of the 2004 enlargement on the EU institutions leads her to argue 'that the "business as usual" picture is more convincing than the "gridlock picture" as regards practice in and output from the EU institutions since May 2004' (Wallace 2007: 5–6; emphasis in the original). As data reported by Best and Settembri (2007) for the Council indicate, important legislation does, as is to be expected, take longer than 'ordinary' or 'minor' legislation, 'but there is no significant difference between the EU15 and EU25: Ordinary acts are actually decided, significantly faster . . . after enlargement' (Best and Settembri 2007: 6). This raises not only the question as to why more member states do not need more time to take decisions, but also many more issues that arise with regard to how successive enlargements – in combination with other factors – have affected timing, tempo, sequence and duration in EU policy-making. Moreover, enlargement has had consequences for other dimensions of political timescapes. Enlargement is likely to have affected the choice of terms, for instance, the 18 months' troika Presidencies of the Council, and the choice of time-related features of EU policy, such as the phasing out of the traditional common agricultural policy with its reliance on guaranteed prices over the next decade.

Treating time as an independent variable, we may ask how the respective terms, time budgets and time horizons of national and EU participants in the EU accession process have materially affected enlargement decisions, such as the willingness to ask for and concede derogations. To give an example, the investiture of the Prodi government in 1999 and especially the appointment of a Commissioner for Enlargement created a strong incentive within the Commission to complete the eastern enlargement of the EU within the time budget of five years (see Avery 2009; Lass-Lennecke and Werner 2009). Similarly, the end of the EP term

and the elections scheduled for June 2004 created a specific time horizon for EU institutions and for candidate states which narrowed down the alternatives for the choice of an enlargement date. In other words, it is likely to be difficult to explain enlargement of the EU without recourse to temporal categories, especially the terms, time budgets and time horizons of the relevant actors.

Differentiation¹

Political and academic debate surrounding the phenomenon of differentiated integration is replete with time-centred images and metaphors. In Stubb's (1996) categorization, time is one of the three main variables of differentiated integration, the others being 'space' and 'matter'. The notions frequently employed in discussions of temporal differentiation include, for example, multi-speed Europe, vanguards or laggards. Following Stubb, major examples of such temporal differentiation include transition periods, temporary derogations, or the temporal structuring of European monetary union (EMU) and of the adoption of the single currency.

Next to analysing such patterns of temporal differentiation, appreciating the potential of, and limitations to, differentiated integration as a political tool also invites us to consider temporal aspects of differentiation. For example, what can we say about the *speed* with which such arrangements have been introduced or abolished? Answering this question may help us to judge whether differentiation is a short-term expediency or part of longer-term institutional design. And what do we know about the *duration* of differentiated institutional decision-making and, in particular, policy arrangements? For example, if one compares different enlargement rounds, has there been a lengthening or a shortening of transitional arrangements and temporary derogations? If this were to be the case, it might indicate that full integration is becoming ever more difficult to achieve.

If we turn to time as an independent variable, it is interesting to note how not only historical-institutionalism, but also neo-functionalism and 'neo-neofunctionalism' (Schmitter 2004) emphasize temporal factors as central to their causal accounts of integration, although the implications for *differentiated* integration require some teasing out. Thus, Schmitter (2004), building on work first published more than 30 years previously (Schmitter 1970), seeks to elucidate the temporal logic that underlies functional spillovers in economic-social integration and the spillover of the latter into political integration. In so doing, he puts emphasis on the fundamental importance of cycles, including 'initiation cycles', 'priming cycles' and 'transforming cycles'. Whilst initiation cycles constitute the start of the integration process, priming cycles are about changes that 'define the context of a crisis that is compelling actors to change their strategies' (Schmitter 2004: 61). During a 'transformative cycle', a qualitative transformation takes place: the member states 'will have exhausted the potentialities inherent in functionally integrating their economies and dedicate more and more of their efforts to functionally integrating their polities' (Schmitter 2004: 65–6).

With reference to differentiated integration, it is especially relevant to note that the idea of a cyclical development is closely linked to notions of asynchronic change in the key variables that drive actors to change their strategies. Thus, Schmitter hypothesizes that during priming cycles asynchrony ‘in rates of change at the national level sets up – due to their differing marginal impacts – asynchrony in rates of regional change. This, in turn, enhances the probability that less convergent, and possibly divergent, actor strategies will be promoted and this makes the adoption of a joint policy vector more and more difficult’ (2004: 64).

Several implications flow from these suggestions. First, if it makes sense to think of European integration as a process with cyclical elements, it might also be instructive to explore evidence for differentiated integration as a cyclical phenomenon. Second, in thinking about such stages, it might be useful to refer to the idea of ‘interstitial institutional change’, as developed by Farrell and Héritier (2007). The decisive point here is to understand the dynamics of informal differentiation, on the one hand, and formal differentiation, on the other. Third, the notion of asynchronic development in national conditions that shape integration – both within and across states – might help to understand the emergence of demands for differentiation and the durability or transience of the latter.

Democratization

Is the EU able to ‘keep pace’ with its economic, social and technological environment? Does it have an appropriate timescape to meet the challenges it faces? Several authors have highlighted the tension between growing acceleration in economic, social and technological developments, on the one hand, and traditional democratic timescapes, on the other. Scheuerman (2004; see also Scheuerman 2001), in his stimulating book *Liberal Democracy and the Social Acceleration of Time*, argues that social

acceleration poses fundamental challenges to the temporal fundamentals of the separation of powers . . . High-speed society tends to favor high-speed political institutions, and traditional liberal democratic assumptions about temporality unwittingly aggrandize executive power and weaken broad-based popular legislatures.

(Scheuerman 2004: 26)

In a similar vein, Rosa (2003, 2005) has suggested that we witness an increasing ‘desynchronization’ between politics and its social, economic, cultural and technological environments. On the one hand, he argues, ‘the time needed for democratic political decision-making is not just hard to accelerate, since processes of deliberation and aggregation in a pluralist democratic society inevitably take time’ (2003: 23). In fact, for a variety of reasons, including, *inter alia*, growing calls for regulation and more time needed for consensus-building, the demand for time resources increases. On the other hand, the speed with which

societies change accelerates, leading to a politics that becomes increasingly 'situationalist' and the shifting of decisions to other, faster decision-making arenas (like the economy or the legal system – juridification) (Rosa 2003: 23f.).

Examining EU time from this perspective begs the question of which parts of the EU institutional order might be strengthened as a result of pressures for speedy decisions. More generally, it invites research on how quickly the EU – as compared to national institutions – succeeds in detecting and problematizing new challenges, on the one hand, and manages to generate acceptable policy responses, on the other. Existing data on the legislative process can only provide a partial response to this question. First, they do not cover the often extended period of consultation and preparation prior to the formal submission of draft legislation by the Commission. For example, how long does it take to produce a Green Paper and how much time on average elapses between a Green Paper and a White Paper and the tabling of a legislative proposal by the Commission? Second, there is, of course, a big part of policy-centred activity in the EU that is not oriented towards the production of legislation (or in which legislation plays only a minor part).

Turning to time as an independent variable, perhaps the overarching question in the context of democratization concerns the consequences of distinct configuration of terms, time budgets and time horizons of the different EU policy-makers (Goetz 2009). Does the fact that EU policy-makers across the different institutions do not work to the same clock systematically encourage the opening up of 'windows of opportunity' for deliberation? Or, on the contrary, are the resultant pressures for intra-institutional and inter-institutional co-ordination and synchronization so strong as to encourage 'governing by timetable', in which substantive deliberation is sacrificed on the altar of time-efficient policy-making?

THE EU TIMESCAPE IN CONTEXT

This special issue has sought to make a case for studying the manner in which political time is institutionalized in the EU. Studying the EU timescape involves, in particular, an analysis of terms, time budgets, time horizons; of the temporal features of decision-taking; and of the time structures embedded in policies. These issues matter because they affect the distribution of power in, and the performance and legitimacy of, the EU. The specific configurations of the functions of political time in the EU; the precise nature of the time rules that institutions and actor follow; the terms, time budgets and time horizons within which they act; the degrees of temporal autonomy they enjoy; their capacity to set the clock for others; their ability to engage in the discretionary use of time; the temporal properties of EU policies – all are important elements of the EU political timescape, with implications for democracy, transparency and the quality of governance.

For the comparativist, the main question that arises is: what is specific (though not necessarily unique) about the EU timescape? And in seeking to

answer this question, what should the EU be compared with – national political systems and, if so, which, or other international organizations? Both questions – about singularity and comparators – are, of course, hardy perennials in EU scholarship.

In the main, the comparative literature that we have referred to in the introduction (Goetz and Meyer-Sahling 2009) concerns national political systems, a fact which at least in part reflects our own background in comparative politics rather than international relations. Certainly, the democratic timescapes of parliamentary versus presidential systems and unitary versus federal systems can be expected to differ significantly, notably in the degree to which terms, time budgets and time horizons are synchronized across institutions and levels of government. We would expect a greater degree of synchronicity in parliamentary and unitary systems, whereas presidential systems of government and federal systems have a higher degree of asynchronicity built into their constitution.

The lack of synchronization of the political terms at the EU level, in particular, the Presidency of the Council and the EP (see Goetz 2009), might suggest that the inter-institutional timescape of the EU political system is closer to a federal parliamentary system as found, for example, in Germany, or a federal presidential system, as in the US. The introduction of a President of the European Council to be appointed for two and a half years, as envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty, would increase the temporal alignment of EU institutions and support arguments that point towards the parliamentarization of the EU; but, for the moment, ‘most similar cases’ are unlikely to be found in parliamentary systems.

Yet the scope of political timescapes should not be limited to the alignment of terms, time budgets and time horizons across institutions. Rather, we would expect that political systems systematically group together specific temporal features at the polity, politics and policy dimensions. The literature on political business cycles suggests that the dimensions of polity, politics and policy are temporally closely interrelated, as time budgets – polity – influence the use of temporal rules in decision-making – politics – which in turn favours particular temporal patterns of policy.

In the case of the EU, there is no dominant political cycle and there is no dominant political time-setter (Goetz 2009). Instead, political terms are at best partly synchronized and the rights to use time in the legislative process are shared among the three core institutions of the EU. The discussion of EU policy in the introductory article also points in the direction of higher levels of continuity, consistency and gradualism as characteristic features of EU policy time.

This combination of temporal features contrasts above all with parliamentary systems of a Westminster-type, which combine a synchronization of institutional cycles with the allocation of temporal powers in the legislative process (by and large) exclusively to the government (Döring 2004). Moreover, debates on the politics of tax policy, economic policy, and administrative reform – to mention but a few examples – have traditionally identified a

greater propensity for stop-and-go policies, policy U-turns, radical reforms and a higher pace of reform in Westminster systems such as in the UK and New Zealand (Steinmo 1993; Hall 1986; Hood 1994).

In short, a case can be made for the cross-dimensional patterning of temporal features and thus the presence of different timescapes of political systems much in accordance with discussions surrounding different patterns of democracy (Lijphart 1999). But it is, in any case, not without risks to try to undertake comparative analysis at such a systemic level. Especially in the case of the EU, the political system has not reached a point of stability and maturity comparable to that of national political systems. Political time in the EU is, therefore, not only likely to be more changeable than in consolidated national democracies; the EU timescape can also be expected to show greater tensions, contradictions and disjunctures.

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NOTE

1 This section draws on Goetz (forthcoming).

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