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# Navigating Regime Complexes in Turbulent Times—The EU’s Interaction with Other International Organizations in Crises

Benjamin Daßler  · Sandra Bandemer · Berthold Rittberger · Moritz Weiß

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**Abstract** Over the past decades, the European Union (EU) has confronted multiple crises, which have prompted swift political responses from the EU’s member states and institutions. While there is a broad literature about the EU’s *internal* responses to crises, we know much less about the EU’s interactions with *external* actors. Because the EU is part of issue-specific regime complexes, it has cultivated relationships with international organizations (IOs) across a multitude of issues. We argue that during crises, the EU has heightened incentives to complement its internal crisis response by interactions with other IOs that vary in their qualities. How can the EU’s external engagement during crises be conceptualized and theoretically explained? Drawing on the regime complexity literature, we identify three different types of interactions among IOs to conceptualize the EU’s varying external engagements during crises periods: *pooling*, *division of labor*, and *competition*. We further argue that under the condition of regime complexity, the choice of interorganizational interaction is shaped by the convergence of means and ends among the respective dyads of IOs. To illustrate the usefulness of our typology for the study of the EU’s external

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responses to crises, as well as the plausibility of our argument, we analyze three instances of EU–IO relationships in crisis contexts: pooling between the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to address the sovereign debt crisis, division of labor between the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine, and competition between the EU and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) during the “migration crisis.”

**Keywords** Crisis politics · European Union (EU) · Regime complexity · International organizations · Crisis management

## **Navigieren durch Regimekomplexe in turbulenten Zeiten – die Interaktion der EU mit anderen internationalen Organisationen in Krisen**

**Zusammenfassung** In den letzten Jahrzehnten sah sich die Europäische Union (EU) mit einer Reihe von fundamentalen Krisen konfrontiert, die rasche politische Reaktionen ihrer Mitgliedstaaten und Institutionen erforderten. Während die Literatur, die sich mit den internen Krisenpolitiken der EU beschäftigt inzwischen sehr umfangreich ist, wissen wir viel weniger über die Interaktionen der EU mit externen Akteuren. Da die EU Teil von politikfeldspezifischen Regimekomplexen ist, hat sie über die Zeit diverse Beziehungen zu internationalen Organisationen (IOs) in einer Vielzahl von Bereichen aufgebaut. Wir argumentieren, dass die EU in Krisenzeiten verstärkte Anreize hat, ihre interne Krisenreaktion durch solche externen Interaktionen mit anderen IOs unterschiedlicher Qualitäten zu ergänzen. Wie können diese externen Interaktionen der EU während Krisen konzeptualisiert und theoretisch erklärt werden? Basierend auf der Literatur zur Regimekomplexität identifizieren wir drei verschiedene Arten von Interaktionen zwischen IOs, um die unterschiedlichen externen Interaktionsformen der EU während Krisenzeiten zu konzeptualisieren: „*pooling*“, „*division of labour*“ und „*competition*“. Wir argumentieren weiter, dass unter der Bedingung von Regimekomplexität die Wahl der interorganisationalen Interaktion durch die Konvergenz von Mitteln und Zielen zwischen den jeweiligen IO-Dyaden geprägt wird. Um die Nützlichkeit unserer Typologie für die Untersuchung der externen Krisenreaktionen der EU und die Plausibilität unseres Arguments zu veranschaulichen, analysieren wir drei Fälle von EU-IO-Beziehungen in Krisenkontexten: Pooling zwischen der EU und dem Internationalen Währungsfonds (IWF) zur Bewältigung der Staatsschuldenkrise; Arbeitsteilung zwischen der EU und der North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) als Reaktion auf Russlands Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine; und Wettbewerb zwischen der EU und dem Europäischen Gerichtshof für Menschenrechte (EGMR) während der sogenannten „Migrationskrise“.

**Schlüsselwörter** Krisenpolitik · Europäische Union (EU) · Regimekomplexität · Internationale Organisationen · Krisenmanagement

## 1 Introduction

Today, the European Union (EU) finds itself confronted with multiple crises<sup>1</sup> touching on a wide spectrum of policies and policy challenges, including financial and economic stability, migration, health, and security. The EU member states and institutions have responded to these crises with a variety of *internal* responses. These include, for example, the leveraging of new financial capacities through the Next Generation EU program and the European Peace Facility. They also contain the reform of existing regulatory frameworks, such as the Stability and Growth Pact and the Pact for Migration and Asylum. In short, the EU has created and activated a plethora of policy instruments to address crisis symptoms and effects, which has resulted in an expansion of the scope and depth of EU integration (Leuffen et al. 2022). These *internal* crisis responses have received widespread scholarly attention. A broad strand in the literature has explored how the various crises have resulted in vastly different integration outcomes (see, among others, Biermann et al. 2019; Börzel and Risse 2018; Schimmelfennig 2018) and how member states were incentivized to overcome their reluctance to advance the integration even in areas of “core state powers” (Genschel and Jachtenfuchs 2018; Genschel et al. 2023; Kelemen and McNamara 2022; Kruck and Weiss 2023; Schelkle 2021; Schimmelfennig and Winzen 2023; Schmidt 2020).

While the existing literature shares the presumption that the EU's crisis response is predominantly—if not exclusively—the result of political processes *internal* to the EU, crisis reactions have also included the initiation of varying forms of interaction with other international organizations (IOs). While there is a well-established literature on why and how IO relationships form and evolve over time (Biermann 2008, 2015; Biermann and Koops 2017; Clark 2021; Panke and Stapel 2023a), scholarship exploring the EU's crisis-induced forms of interaction with other IOs is still scant.<sup>2</sup> Adopting an inside-out perspective on the EU's crisis responses is apposite: Neither are the manifold causes and consequences of political crises restricted to the EU alone, nor does the EU act in an institutional vacuum when it decides how to address the myriad crisis-related challenges. After all, the EU interacts with a variety of international actors, sharing issue-specific and sometimes overlapping mandates and membership. This implies that the EU is part of broader regime complexes, i.e., “partially overlapping and nonhierarchical institutions governing a particular issue-area” (Alter and Meunier 2009; Alter and Raustiala 2018; Raustiala and Victor 2004, p. 279). The proliferation of institutions with overlapping policy mandates and the absence of formal hierarchies among them provide the background against which interorganizational coordination occurs. International organizations coordinate their activities not only to achieve coherence and to leverage synergies but also to compete

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<sup>1</sup> Following Lipsy (2020), we define crisis as any situation “that threatens significant harm to a country's population or basic values and compels a political response under time pressure and uncertainty” (Lipsy 2020, p. E99).

<sup>2</sup> See Henning (2017) on why the EU drew on the IMF in the context of the sovereign debt crisis. See also the literature on the EU's externalization of EU migration control (e.g., Müller and Slominski [2021]; Frelick et al. [2016]; Bergmann and Müller [2023]).

over competencies and resources (Biermann and Koops 2017; Clark 2021; Daßler 2024; Gehring and Faude 2014; Green 2022; Morse and Keohane 2014; Pratt 2018). As a truly multipurpose IO, the EU is no exception and has cultivated relationships with other IOs across a multitude of issues (Delreux and Earsom 2023; Panke and Stapel 2023b). Today, the EU is one of the most active IOs when it comes to navigating regime complexes and has entered formal cooperative agreements with many other IOs (Panke and Stapel 2023b).<sup>3</sup> How can the EU's external engagement with other IOs be conceptualized and theoretically explained?

To answer this research question, our paper focuses on a specific subset of cases of EU interactions with other IOs, namely those interactions that were triggered by a crisis. We contend that while crises do not determine the specific nature of interactions between the EU and external actors, they can serve as crucial catalysts, compelling the EU to supplement its internal crisis response mechanisms with external collaborations: In times of crisis, when IOs' problem-solving capacities are wanting and prevailing regulatory competencies are ill-equipped to confront extraordinary challenges, IOs face heightened incentives to coordinate their activities with other IOs in their respective regime complex. For example, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, overcoming its own capacity constraints, launched a major coordinated effort with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to meet the overwhelming demand for COVID-19 recovery in the Asia–Pacific region (Zaccaria 2024). Since 2014, the worsening war in Ukraine has prompted the EU to outsource crisis management activities to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe because it lacks the civilian and military capabilities, regulatory capacity, and reputation to confront Russia (Amadio Viceré and Giulia 2021). Surely, IOs coordinate their behaviors in normal times, too, but unlike in normal times, crises increase the incentives to engage with other IOs due to extraordinary problem pressures. Crisis responses are formulated under time pressure, urgency, and uncertainty (Lipsy 2020). Moreover, since political crisis responses are negotiated under conditions of high politicization, pathways to reform may be blocked (see Hooghe and Marks 2009; Börzel and Risse 2018; Ferrara and Kriesi 2022). This increases the attractiveness of complementing internal crisis responses with external ones. Drawing on the regime complexity literature, this paper attempts to conceptualize and theorize this highly relevant but understudied universe of cases, the *EU's external crisis responses*.

In short, the paper will demonstrate that under the condition of regime complexity—when mandate and membership overlap between the EU and other IOs—the choice of interorganizational interaction is shaped by the convergence of means and ends among the respective dyad of IOs. To do so, we show in Sect. 2 that interactions among IOs display significant variation with regard to their *quality*, including cooperative forms of interaction as well as conflictual interactions. We develop three types of IO interactions: pooling, division of labor, and competition. In Sect. 3 we highlight two conditions that shape the quality of IO interaction: convergence of

<sup>3</sup> On the EU's navigation of regime complexes, see also Brosig et al. (2023); Orsini and Kang (2023); Quaglia and Spendzharova (2023); Margulis (2023); Kissack (2023); Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik et al. (2023); Dikaios and Blavoukos (2023); Dee (2023).

ends and convergence of means. While “means” refers to the policy instruments and resources available to IOs to address a particular crisis, “ends” refers to the overarching policy goals pursued by both IOs and their member states in the context of a crisis. Depending on the constellation of both conditions, we expect IO interactions to vary. The dyad may pool resources, divide labor, or compete over policies. To be sure, although we apply our argument to a specific universe of cases, the EU's crisis-induced interactions, our conceptualization and theoretical argument also travels to cases of IO interaction in normal times. Our empirical Sect. 4 analyzes three different crisis-induced interactions between the EU and other IOs against the backdrop of three crisis episodes: the eurozone crisis, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, and the “migration crisis” in Europe. Finally, Sect. 5 discusses the implications of our approach for research on the EU as an actor in global crisis management, the longer-term consequences of the different forms of interaction observed in our case studies for dyadic IO relations, and important avenues for further research on the impact of crises on IO relations in particular and regime complexes in general.

## 2 IO Interactions in Regime Complexes: A Typology

Under conditions of regime complexity, i.e., the presence of other IOs with overlapping mandates and overlapping state membership (Alter and Raustiala 2018; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Westerwinter 2022; Haftel and Lenz 2022; Henning 2017; Henning and Pratt 2023; Hofmann 2009; Johnson and Urpelainen 2012; Zürn and Faude 2013), there are incentives for IOs to reach out to other IOs. Thus, in our conceptualization of IO interaction, mandate and membership overlap is a crucial scope condition. Interaction is incentivized only when there is some degree of overlap; otherwise, both actors can act unilaterally, avoiding transaction costs and coordination problems.

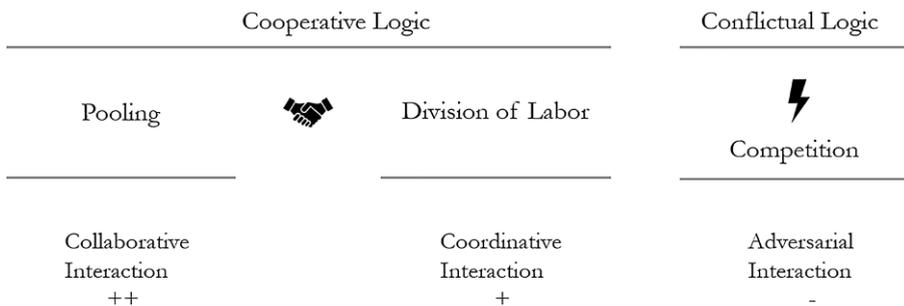
While IOs face manifold incentives to cooperate during normal times, during crises these incentives are particularly high. Indeed, crises may trigger IO interaction that would not have unfolded otherwise, as external cooperation may represent an important supplement for each IOs' own internal crisis responses (see, e.g., Amadio Viceré and Giulia 2021; Henning 2017, 2019; Zaccaria 2024). When an IO's own crisis management capacities are under stress, establishing closer coordination or cooperation among IOs can enhance problem-solving efficiency and effectiveness (Biermann 2008; Gehring and Faude 2014; Clark 2021; Panke and Stapel 2023a). For a multipurpose IO such as the EU, confronted with multiple and often interdependent crises, developing relationships with other IOs thus expands the EU's portfolio of available internal crisis response instruments. However, regime complexity also invites competition among IOs, as overlap may result in IOs relying on similar resources provided by simultaneous membership of states (Biermann and Koops 2017; Hofmann 2009; Koops 2011). In short, overlapping mandates and membership can give rise to both cooperative and conflictual interactions among IOs, in normal times as well as in times of crisis.

To identify the different qualities that interaction among IOs can take, it is useful to conceive of regime complexes as networks, i.e., (non)hierarchical structures of policy coordination and differentiation among institutional actors (Alter and Raustiala 2018; Biermann 2008; Daßler 2022, 2024; Faude and Große-Kreul 2020; Henning 2017; Henning and Pratt 2023; Pratt 2018). Regime complexes are self-coordinating networks in which different actors address a particular policy problem, albeit oftentimes with very different instruments and strategies (Alter and Raustiala 2018; Haftel and Hofmann 2019; Henning and Pratt 2023; Hofmann 2009; Orsini et al. 2013). Still, since the actors within a given regime complex govern the same political issue (e.g., security, trade, financial stability, human rights, or climate change), IOs within these networks naturally position themselves in relation to other IOs in the respective network.

In this paper, we argue that the IO networks underlying different regime complexes are constituted by the diverse interactions of their constitutive actors. To grasp the potential variation in the quality of these interactions, we build on Scharpf (1994) and, in a first step, distinguish between a cooperative and a conflictual logic underlying dyadic IO interactions. Cooperative forms of interaction imply a positive-sum orientation, and both actors involved expect to be jointly better off. Conversely, adversarial interactions are characterized by a zero-sum orientation: Actors are openly in conflict, and each actor’s actions have the potential to harm the other actor. Within the first category of interactions that follow a cooperative logic, we further distinguish between collaborative forms of interaction that involve the mutual sharing of capabilities on the one hand, and more modest coordinative forms of interaction that involve the complementary but unilateral use of the capabilities of individual IOs on the other hand. Based on these three generic forms of interactions, we develop three distinct types of dyadic IO interactions (Fig. 1).

- *Pooling* is the most cooperative form of dyadic IO interaction. IOs opt for an integrative response by pooling resources: Separate capacities become joint capacities. Both IOs decide together which integrative steps are necessary to counter negative crisis effects. Pooling typically implies the sharing and exchange of significant

### A Qualitative Spectrum of IO Interaction in Regime Complexes



**Fig. 1** Two logics and three types of international organization (IO) interaction in regime complexes

material as well as immaterial resources, such as funding and information (Clark 2021). The pooling and sharing of vital resources tends to imply that IOs clarify mutual responsibilities as well as possibilities for redress, which usually results in rather determinate rules of interaction (Abbott et al. 2000, pp. 412–415). An example of pooling is the United Nations' (UN) cooperation with the African Union (AU) in the context of the Ebola crisis in 2014 (Ifediora and Aning 2017). In the form of the so-called Global Ebola Response Coalition, the UN, represented by its specialized suborganization the World Health Organization (WHO), joined forces with the AU by pooling personnel and financial resources to support those West African states struggling with the Ebola outbreak (United Nations 2014).

- *Division of labor* designates coordinative interactions among IOs. Instead of integrating their capacities, in the case of a division of labor both IOs use their own instruments separately, while closely coordinating their activities. The IOs engage in a joint, cooperative crisis response, but their interactions are geared toward coordinating their individual responsibilities and separate resources. This form of IO interaction is characterized by a clear functional differentiation of responsibilities and resources. Coordination efforts among the IOs are less demanding compared to pooling, since responsibilities and tasks are clearly and separately defined for each IO (Gehring and Faude 2014). Take as an example the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank's rather loose but complementary relationship in response to the global financial crisis from 2007 onward (Kranke 2020). Both IOs acknowledged their respective responsibility and competence. However, tasks remained clearly separated. The IMF focused on promoting policy responses and providing emergency liquidity support to the most severely affected states (Clift 2018), whereas the World Bank directed the bulk of its crisis support to moderately affected countries focusing on long-term economic stabilization programs (Independent Evaluation Group 2015).
- *Competition* refers to dyadic IO interactions characterized by conflict: The activities of one IO undermine or even harm those of the other IO. The interactions have a zero-sum quality. In the case of competition, the crisis response of one IO is at the expense of the crisis response of the other IO. An example of institutional competition is the conflictual attempts of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the WHO to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1990s. The dispute arose over whether to prioritize intellectual property rights (i.e., obligations under the WTO's TRIPS Agreement) or access to life-saving medicines (i.e., obligations to provide universal access to medicines under the WHO's constitution). While both IOs frequently interacted via institutional forums, their exchange was marked by intense conflict and public disputes on the squaring of the right to health with the protection of intellectual property, and both IOs claimed sole legitimacy for solving the crisis (Daßler et al. 2019).

In sum, we argue that it is analytically valuable to analyze the qualities of dyadic IO interaction in order to better apprehend the different crisis coping strategies the EU, and IOs in general, have at their disposal. In the next section, we introduce two factors, which we argue, all else equal, induce the occurrence of each of the three different types of IO interaction.

### 3 Convergence of Ends and Means: Theorizing IO Interactions in Times of Crisis

While IO interaction also occurs in normal times, crises can serve as important triggers for IO interaction. There are two sets of positive incentives that make it particularly attractive for IOs to reach out to other IOs in times of crisis. First, interacting with another IO may reduce the political costs, as it renders reputational losses less likely. Crises require political decisions to be made under the conditions of threat, uncertainty, and urgency. Therefore, politicians as well as public officials face heightened political costs of looming policy failures. Coordinating crisis responses or even cooperating to jointly tackle a crisis can be particularly attractive for IOs that share crisis-related mandates. In the likely event of policy failures, politicians as well as public officials have an elevated incentive to avoid blame, especially if the IO entrusted with addressing the crisis-induced policy challenge is the only one perceived responsible. Reaching out to other IOs during crises, thereby sharing political responsibilities, may allow shifting and diffusion of blame, which can ultimately help politicians and officials avoid the political costs that ensue if blame for policy failures is attributed to them (Kriegmair et al. 2021; Park et al. 2018).

Second, reaching out to other IOs during periods of crisis can be a beneficial strategy for functional reasons. In crisis periods, when problem pressure is particularly high, the pooling of resources and the exchange of information with other (and potentially more specialized) IOs can be particularly useful (Biermann 2008, 2015; Biermann and Koops 2017; Clark 2021; Gehring and Faude 2014). Moreover, cooperation among IOs can reduce information deficits that political decision-makers confront, which are endemic during fast-moving crises. Taking potentially costly decisions under time pressure creates a demand for policy-relevant information. By institutionalizing the sharing of relevant data and information, crisis-related cooperation among IOs can thus redress epistemic deficits.

However, close interaction with other IOs in times of crisis also comes with significant *costs* for IOs. The first and most obvious cost is an increase in external dependence and a loss in autonomy that may outlast a particular crisis. Establishing closer relationships with other IOs in response to crises might entail the risk of autonomy losses, which would impede the pursuit of independent political agendas in the future (Biermann 2008). When it comes to sharing sensible information, there is also a risk of losing the trust of individual member states and their domestic constituencies if, for instance, information is shared with other IOs that would be otherwise subject to more restrictive privacy requirements (Carnegie and Carson 2019; Clemens and Kremer 2016). Thus, even under significant functional and time pressures prevalent in crises, “guarding institutional autonomy and trying to ‘go it alone’ has an almost intuitive appeal for international organizations” (Biermann 2008, p. 158).

These positive and negative incentives to navigate issue-specific regime complexes constitute the opportunity structure for IOs to enter the three distinct types of crisis-induced interactions that we developed above. We thus hold that under the (scope) condition of regime complexity, dyadic IO interaction in times of cri-

sis should display significant variation. What drives this variation?<sup>4</sup> We argue that a combination of two IO dyadic factors, which follow a sequential logic, is key: first, convergence of ends, and then convergence of means. While the former helps us understand when crisis-induced IO interactions are either cooperative or conflictual, the latter helps us differentiate between collaborative and coordinative forms of cooperation.

First, IOs' crisis responses can be aligned with regard to their preferred objectives and outcomes reflected in a shared political mission and similar strategic interests. We refer to such a condition as *convergence of ends*. While IOs populating the same regime complex normally share a basic understanding of the purpose of cooperation on the respective issue, they may significantly differ on their preferred political objectives when confronted with highly specific, crisis-related policy challenges (Biermann and Daßler 2024; Faude and Große-Kreul 2020; Henning 2019; Kreuder-Sonnen and Zürn 2020; Orsini et al. 2013). When IOs pursue similar political objectives during a respective crisis, i.e., when their ends converge, this creates a sense of unity and common purpose that can be a powerful motivator for cooperation. Convergence of ends also fosters mutual understanding among IOs: If IOs comprehend each other's goals in the context of crisis, they are more likely to understand each other's actions and intentions. This mutual understanding can facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty and the risk of miscommunication. Thus, convergence of ends increases the likelihood that interactions follow cooperative logics, as both IOs are pulling into the same direction by adjusting their policy positions and developing coordinated strategies (Pratt 2018). When IOs disagree over their preferred course of action to address a crisis situation, a condition we refer to as *divergence of ends*, their interactions are more likely to be conflictual. Diverging ends can lead to disagreements among IOs, as each is likely to prioritize its own goals over those of others. Overall, we hold that the convergence (divergence) of ends triggers a cooperative (conflictual) logic of interaction in a dyad.

*Convergence of means* refers to the extent to which IOs can draw on similar organizational resources—including expertise and material and regulatory capacities—to address a crisis. In times of crisis, an IO may not possess sufficient organizational resources to individually leverage an effective crisis response. When IOs converge in their means, i.e., when they possess similar organizational resources, a joint crisis response has the potential to be more consequential and effective, since this allows IOs to pool their individual resources. By contrast, in crisis situations where IOs possess complementary rather than similar organizational resources at their disposal, i.e., when their means diverge, it is likely that the problem pressure induced by a crisis will incentivize IOs to engage in a functional division of labor. Each IO can focus on what it does best, leveraging its unique strengths and capabilities

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<sup>4</sup> In the following, we develop a tentative theoretical argument that helps to better capture the variation of IOs' crisis interactions across crises and issue areas. It is important to note that our paper does not intend to provide an exhaustive framework or robust empirical tests of our claims. To be sure, there are likely manifold factors that shape IO interactions in periods of turbulence and turmoil. However, we seek to open a theoretical debate of these potential drivers by introducing two general factors deduced from the literature on interorganizational relations and regime complexity that we deem relevant and influential when it comes to the quality of interactions.

to address a common objective. Although tasks are clearly delineated between the two actors, division of labor can increase efficiency and effectiveness, as each IO can specialize in its area of expertise, draw on its specific resource base, and avoid duplicating the efforts of others. In other words, when we observe means divergence among IOs, we expect that the respective dyad will opt for a coordinative response, namely a division of labor: Each IO brings to the table what it does best.

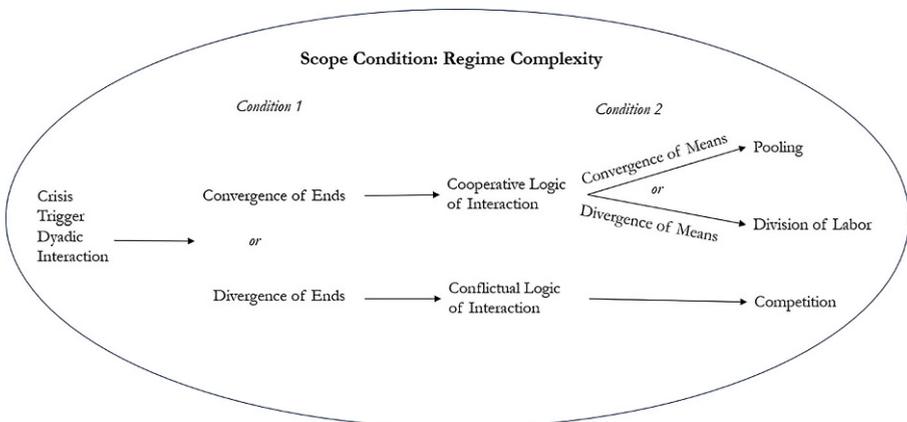
In sum, the occurrence of the three different types of IO interactions depends on whether IOs' crisis-related ends and means converge or diverge: Variation of ends makes crisis-induced interactions follow either a cooperative logic (pooling or division of labor) or a conflictual (competition) logic. Variation of means affects whether cooperative interactions come in a collaborative (pooling) or coordinative (division of labor) form. Based on the above considerations, we spell out two conjectures:

*Conjecture (1):* When two IOs converge (diverge) in the ends of how to respond to a crisis, their crisis-induced interaction will follow a cooperative (conflictual) logic.

*Conjecture (2):* When two cooperative IOs converge in their crisis-related means, they are more likely to pool their resources. By contrast, when two cooperative IOs diverge in their crisis-related means, they are more likely to engage in a division of labor.

Figure 2 illustrates our theoretical argument and its underlying logic.

In the following empirical section, we illustrate our theoretical framework by analyzing three cases of crisis-induced dyadic interactions between the EU and IOs with institutional overlap that we argue come particularly close to the ideal types we have theorized. Although selecting our cases on the dependent variable delimits the *external* validity of our findings, we still consider this case selection beneficial, as the EU is an ideal case to test the *internal* validity and consistency of our argument. Due to its broad mandate and large membership, the EU is involved in a wide variety of issues compared to other IOs with a more limited mandate and membership, making it more likely to observe wide variations in crisis-related dyadic interactions. The



**Fig. 2** Crisis-induced dyadic international organization interaction under the condition of regime complexity

next section thus analyzes how and why distinct crisis-induced dyadic interactions between the EU and other IOs emerged in response to different crises, across different issue areas, and over time: (1) the EU–IMF interaction to address the eurozone crisis (pooling), (2) the EU–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) interaction in response to Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine (division of labor), and (3) the EU–European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) interaction in the context of the “migration crisis” (competition).

## 4 The EU’s Crisis-Induced Interaction with Other IOs

This analysis is an illustrative plausibility probe, which draws on the logic of congruence analysis (Blatter and Blume 2008; Blatter and Haverland 2012) by matching the presence of our hypothesized conditions and the respective inter-IO crisis relationships in three different crisis situations. We argue that the EU, as a truly multipurpose IO, is very well suited to illustrate our argument: Keeping one IO—the EU—constant in the respective dyads allows us to rule out a set of IO-specific drivers of crisis relations. The choice of different institutional partners and policy areas allows us to vary both the convergence of ends and the convergence of means for each pair of IOs. On the other hand, by focusing exclusively on dyads involving the EU, the external validity of our findings is rather limited, but we believe that our analysis is well suited to test the overall consistency of our argument.

Each of the three case illustrations is structured as follows. We begin by providing a short introduction to the crisis that triggered the respective responses of the EU and one institutional counterpart in the specific regime complex. We then explore the case-specific variation in our conditions, convergence of ends and means. Finally, we suggest how these conditions have shaped the quality of the EU’s crisis-induced interactions with the respective other IO in the regime complex.

### 4.1 Pooling: EU and IMF in the Sovereign Debt Crisis

In the late 2000s, the global financial system was hit by the most severe crisis since the Great Depression. What began with the bursting of the “housing bubble” in the United States soon developed into an international banking crisis that quickly spilled over into the EU, creating existential financial pressure on already highly indebted member states (Constancio 2012). In late 2009 the rapidly unfolding eurozone crisis required a rapid and unprecedented response by the EU and its member states. Despite initial calls for a “Europe-only” solution, the EU and the IMF developed a cooperative relationship of *pooling* (Henning 2017).<sup>5</sup> The strong convergence of policy objectives (ends) pursued by the two IOs during the sovereign debt crisis,

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<sup>5</sup> Nota bene, this case study covers only the initial phase(s) of the decision by the EU and the IMF to work together in the context of the sovereign debt crisis. It is important to note that in the years that followed, this relationship was not free of conflict. For instance, both sides disagreed on how much austerity was actually appropriate in the case of Greece, and the IMF partially rejected the EU’s fiscal discipline-oriented course (see, e.g., Nordström and Teivainen [2022]).

and their possession of very similar fiscal capacities and policy instruments (means), allowed for the pooling of financial resources in the form of rescue packages and other stabilization mechanisms.

*Convergence of ends:* When the global financial crisis unfolded in the late 2000s, both the IMF and the EU strongly converged with regard to the politically desirable medium- and long-term strategy: Both IOs aimed at restoring financial stability and promoting economic growth in the countries most affected from the crisis. The EU's primary political objective was to ensure the stability of the euro area and to prevent contagion to other countries. The IMF shared this objective, primarily to avoid exchange rate instabilities within but also beyond the eurozone. When the first EU emergency measure to avoid sovereign default of member states, the European Financial Stability Mechanism, was introduced in May 2010, the IMF explicitly emphasized in its staff report on euro area policies that "(...) the ECB [European Central Bank] and the EC [European Commission] strongly agreed with the staff that the crisis management measures put in place are no alternative for immediate action to secure fiscal sustainability, address weak banks, and boost growth" (International Monetary Fund 2010a, p. 12). Both IOs' leading executives had quite similar ideas on what these actions should be and how they should be designed. Most importantly, both IOs agreed that loans provided to EU member states should be tied to political reform conditions. For decades, the IMF has been a proponent of strict neoliberal conditionalities in exchange for bailout programs (Clark and Meyerrose 2022). Over the course of the crisis, the EC as well as the leadership of the ECB proved themselves agents "(...) of the creditor nations in the Eurozone, pushing austerity as the instrument to safeguard the interest of these nations" (de Grauwe 2016, p. 148). Both IOs were further in agreement on how to implement austerity measures. In a joint statement attached to the first €110 billion loan to Greece, Olli Rehn, then EU Commissioner, and Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then Managing Director of the IMF, both emphasized their unity and shared belief "that the program is the right thing to do to put the economy back on track" (International Monetary Fund 2010b). Both IOs further agreed on the concrete instruments to obtain their objectives. For instance, the Task Force for Greece was installed by the Troika (consisting of representatives of the EC, ECB, and IMF) in 2011 to ensure that austerity measures were diligently implemented by sending a permanent "monitoring capacity on the ground" that "keep[s] a full-time eye on the government to prevent the horse-trading and backsliding that has undermined reform plans" (Chaffin and Hope 2011). Taken together, at the outset of the crisis the EU's and the IMF's political objectives on how to solve the eurozone crisis strongly converged, triggering an initial interaction that followed a cooperative logic.

*Convergence of means:* Moreover, at the onset of the crisis, the EU and the IMF had very similar organizational resources and policy instruments at their disposal to address the financial turmoil. The EU and the IMF are both equipped with far-reaching competencies and a vast portfolio of policy instruments when it comes to the management of financial crises. After all, the IMF was created to provide financial assistance to countries experiencing balance of payments difficulties and to promote international monetary cooperation and exchange rate stability (Boughton 1997). In terms of specific tools to address the sovereign debt crisis, the IMF has

a long history of providing assistance through various rescue mechanisms to financial countries facing macroeconomic problems. Among these tools is the IMF's authority to provide unconditional liquidity through general allocations of special drawing rights (IMF 2021) and to provide conditional loans for which governments must comply with austere policy changes in exchange for bailouts (Dreher et al. 2015). Although providing financial stability to its members was not part of the EU's mandate at the time of its creation, monetary policy cooperation gradually intensified, culminating in the creation of the Economic and Monetary Union in 1992. In the Treaty of Maastricht, the EC is explicitly tasked with monitoring "(...) the development of the budgetary situation and of the stock of government debt in the Member States" and in the case of a risk of an excessive deficit is tasked with the application of concrete measures to correct the deficit (European Community 1992, p. 13). Only 5 years later in 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam expanded this mandate by establishing that "[w]here a Member State is in difficulties or is seriously threatened with difficulties as regards its balance of payments (...) [t]he Commission shall state what measures it recommends the State concerned to take," and in case these measures prove insufficient, to "(...) recommend to the Council the granting of mutual assistance and appropriate methods therefor," including "(...) the granting of limited credits by other Member States, subject to their agreement" (European Community 1997, pp. 57–58). Finally, in 2002, the EU Balance of Payments assistance facility was created, an institution that assists EU countries that are outside the euro area and experiencing difficulties regarding their balance of payments, by providing medium-term loans that are conditional on the implementation of policies designed to address underlying economic problems—in striking similarity to the IMF's instrument of conditional loans (European Union 2002). Taken together, at the outset of the sovereign debt crisis, the EU and IMF shared very similar competencies and instruments to assist their respective (overlapping) members in case of financial turmoil.

*Pooling:* This convergence in both ends and means between the EU and the IMF resulted in a crisis-induced relationship that took the form of *pooling*. Despite resistance by some member states during the early stages of the eurozone crisis and initial calls by the German government for a "Europe-only" solution (Spiegel Online 2009), throughout the period 2009–2012 the IMF became an integral part of the EU's crisis response. For instance, the IMF was deeply involved in the financing of the rescue packages for Greece, which were jointly financed by the Troika. Through a fast-track Stand-By Arrangement program, the IMF made a significant financial contribution to the first rescue package for Greece (IMF 2010). In 2012, the IMF also joined the second bailout package for Greece, adding €28 billion in financial aid through its Extended Fund Facility (IMF 2012). Overall, between 2010 and 2015, the IMF participated in bailout programs for four countries in the euro area—Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Cyprus—totaling €78.5 billion in financial aid, which amounts to almost 30% of the financial aid provided to these four countries (Kincaid 2017, p. 152). Moreover, the IMF provided crucial technical expertise to support the EU's effort in mitigating the crisis. By the pooling of financial resources as well as expertise, the EU was able to draw on the Fund's knowledge of loan and conditionality negotiations, as well as on its credibility as guarantor for austerity and

its purported image of a depoliticized actor (Nordström and Teivainen 2023, p. 485). The close cooperation between the two IOs in their response to the eurozone crisis is further reflected in the IMF's prominent role in the EU's institutional responses to the crisis, the creation of the European Financial Stability Facility, and later also of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). Article 8 of the foundational treaties establishing the ESM explicitly states that “[t]he ESM will cooperate very closely with the International Monetary Fund (“IMF”) in providing stability support. The active participation of the IMF will be sought, both at technical and financial level. A euro area Member State requesting financial assistance from the ESM is expected to address, wherever possible, a similar request to the IMF” (EU 2012).

## 4.2 Division of Labor: EU and NATO in Russia's War Against Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, Russia's armed forces launched a full-scale territorial invasion of Ukraine. By drawing on its right of collective self-defense, the Ukrainian government asked for international support of its defense efforts. Russia's aggression marks Europe's most severe security crisis in decades, which prompted the EU to reach out to NATO, the transatlantic military alliance.<sup>6</sup> In their response to Russia's aggression, the two IOs then engaged in a specific distribution of tasks. Considering the oftentimes fraught relationship between the EU and NATO in the past two decades (Hofmann 2013; Howorth 2014; Perot 2019; Weiss 2012), the ensuing crisis-induced relationship is best captured by a *division of labor* and has thus surprised many scholars and pundits alike.

*Convergence of ends:* Against the backdrop of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the EU's crisis-related political objectives have not only converged with those of NATO but have basically become identical: restoring the status quo ante of February 24, 2022. This convergence of ends is evident in their statements in immediate response to the Russian invasion. On February 24, 2022, following an extraordinary meeting of the NATO Council, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg demanded that Russia “immediately cease its military action [and] withdraw its forces from Ukraine,” and like the EU, emphasized NATO's full “support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity” (Stoltenberg 2022). On March 3, the EU published a statement articulating the very same demands: “(...) that Russia immediately ceases its military actions, unconditionally withdraws all forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine and fully respects Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence within its internationally recognised borders and territorial waters” (European Union External Action 2022). Consequently, both IOs shared the primary political objective of weakening Russian war efforts, whereas Ukrainian self-defense must be reinforced. More specifically, NATO and the EU converged in their strategies to raise the costs of warfare for Russia in order

<sup>6</sup> There was clearly membership overlap among both organizations since numerous European states are members of both NATO and the EU. Yet there was also differentiation, as the predominant security provider of the alliance, the United States, is obviously not a member of the EU, nor is Turkey or the United Kingdom. These differences in membership are magnified with respect to defense expenditures. See <https://www.statista.com/chart/14636/defense-expenditures-of-nato-countries/>

to undermine its ability to sustain war efforts. Thus, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the EU's and NATO's political objectives on how to respond strongly converged, triggering an initial interaction that followed a cooperative logic.

*Divergence of means:* Although both IOs pursue similar geopolitical objectives, they draw on vastly different means. The EU was formed as an economic bloc, designed to facilitate trade among its members. To respond to global economic as well as security challenges, the EU's most effective instrument is its outsized market powers (Bradford 2020; Gehring et al. 2017). By contrast, NATO was created as a defensive military alliance based on mutual assistance. Whereas the EU can be considered the most successful market-making project in international politics, NATO is the most capable military alliance and thus a military vanguard. As a result of their distinct founding trajectories, the two IOs draw on divergent means. While “crisis management in militarily semi-permissive environments” (Simón 2019, p. 2) belongs to those tasks that both organizations have identified on paper in their mandates, the EU has never prepared for full-scale, collective, and territorial defense, in spite of the existence of the EU's mutual assistance (Art. 42.7 TEU) and solidarity clauses (Art. 222, TFEU; Perot 2019). By contrast, NATO's mutual defense clause in Art. 5 of the Washington Treaty constitutes the core of its mandate and is thus organizationally reflected in its integrated command structure as a primary policy instrument.

This constellation of divergent means shaped distinct crises responses. For instance, NATO massively reinforced its deterrent posture at the Eastern flank, provided Ukraine's armed forces with intelligence, and coordinated large-scale arms transfers via its *Ukraine Defense Contact Group* (i.e., monthly “Ramstein Air Base meetings”). In parallel, the EU imposed massive economic sanctions on Russia, which included, inter alia, export restrictions for dual-use technologies, prevention of transactions with the Russian Central Bank, and banning of Russian banks from SWIFT, as well as restrictions that were destined to impact Russia's energy sector. This shows that the EU and NATO not only shared almost identical objectives in this severe security crisis, but they also implemented them by drawing on supplementary crisis response instruments.

*Division of labor:* As a result, the crisis-induced relationship in Europe's security regime complex corresponds to a division of labor between EU and NATO. Each IO leveraged its distinct resources and instruments to promote their converging strategies, namely to strengthen Ukraine and to weaken Russia. The EU drew on its market power and fiscal prowess, while NATO leveraged its military expertise and capacities. Yet the relationship between the two IOs is not as formalized as in the case of pooling. There have been neither joint initiatives nor highly institutionalized exchanges at the interorganizational level. Most of the interactions that took place were informal. For instance, the EU's military assistance mission “EUMAM Ukraine” has sought to enhance Ukraine's operational capabilities by training soldiers; NATO had disposed this traditional home turf to restrain its explicit involvement in the war. Therefore, the EU adopted this task, but drew on NATO experience and informal

guidance in operational terms.<sup>7</sup> While this is extensive (informal) coordination, it is not collaborative pooling. Overall, the EU and NATO have employed complementary means to obtain the joint objective of helping Ukraine to sustain its self-defense efforts, which resulted in a division of labor.

### 4.3 Competition: EU and ECtHR in the “Migration Crisis”

The “migration crisis” peaked in 2015 with more than one million individuals arriving in Europe (IOM 2015). The strong influx of migrants brought to the fore the dysfunctionalities of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), particularly putting strain on the asylum systems of EU member states along their external borders, especially those of Italy and Greece. Observing repeated violations of migrants’ rights, the ECtHR handed down consecutive rulings criticizing the EU’s response to the crisis, signaling its dissatisfaction regarding the EU’s noncompliance with human rights provisions and the need to reform the CEAS. Due to this striking divergence of ends regarding the proper handling of the so-called migration crisis, dyadic interactions between the two IOs followed a conflictual logic, with both actors working against each other competitively.

*Divergence of ends:* The ECtHR as the Council of Europe’s legal body judicially reviews acts of EU member states regarding their conformity with the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR). As the EU as such has not acceded to the ECHR (yet), acts performed by EU institutions themselves do not fall under the ECtHR’s jurisdiction. While both the EU and the ECtHR generally subscribe to the core goal of protecting human rights in Europe, operate in strongly interconnected legal frameworks that provide largely equivalent human rights provisions (Groussot and Ericsson 2018), and normally share “complementary and harmonious” (de Witte 2018, p. 226) relations, both IOs’ overarching political goals were at cross-purposes in the context of the “migration crisis.” While the EU placed a strong focus on securing its external borders to control migration flows more effectively, the ECtHR sought to emphasize and strengthen the rights of migrants. At the height of the crisis, the European Council stated that it seeks to “strengthen our presence at sea, to fight the traffickers, to prevent illegal migration flows and to reinforce internal solidarity and responsibility,” as well as to mitigate push factors for migration in migrants’ countries of origin (European Council 2015). This approach primarily hints at the consolidation of preexisting practices related to migration control, such as the expansion of externalization strategies and the securitization of EU border governance (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008; Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016; Léonard and Kaunert 2022). Taking effective measures to improve the conditions of migrants through a reform of the CEAS was not atop the EU’s agenda. This, in turn, was exactly what the ECtHR demanded from the EU. The ECtHR’s crisis-related goals revolved around the achievement of substantial institutional reforms in line with the ECHR as it repeatedly and publicly “highlighted the need to rethink the Dublin system” (Sicilianos 2015, p. 5).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with NATO senior official (online), Munich/Brussels (March 27, 2023). By contrast, pooling would have implied a joint EU–NATO mission to train Ukrainian soldiers.

*Competition:* In line with our expectations, due to this strong divergence of ends, the crisis-induced interactions between the EU and the ECtHR followed a conflictual, adversarial logic. In its case law, the court repeatedly criticized the EU's neglect of migrants' rights protection and questioned the legality of the Dublin Regulation. Already in 2011, long before the "migration crisis" peaked, the ECtHR ruled in its landslide judgment *M.S.S. v. Belgium and Greece* that the extensive reliance on the Dublin Regulation violated the court's absolute understanding of non-refoulement (Fullerton 2017, p. 66). As ECtHR rulings are legally binding, EU member states were forced to follow the court's suit, and the Dublin Regulation could no longer be enforced. The ECtHR's "judicial law-making" (Bošnjak and Zajac 2023) and the fundamental challenge it posed to the EU's asylum system were, however, met only with belated emergency measures and further externalization strategies to keep migrants from entering the EU in the first place (Müller and Slominski 2021; Niemann and Zaun 2018). Hence, we hold that the incompatibility of ends precluded a cooperative response to the "migration crisis" and instead led to severe competition between the two IOs.

## 5 Conclusion

One of the shortcomings of the burgeoning EU crisis politics literature is its predominant focus on EU-internal crisis politics and responses, thus treating the EU's interactions with other IOs as an empirical as well as an analytical afterthought. Introducing a novel perspective, which zooms in on crisis-induced IO interaction, our paper demonstrates that the EU not only interacts with other IOs to address different crisis challenges, but it also highlights and accounts for the varying *quality* of these crisis-induced interactions. Drawing on the literature on regime complexity, in a first step we set out to conceptualize IO interaction under the condition of regime complexity and derived three qualitatively different types. Against this backdrop, we presented two conditions to account for the variation in IO interaction. First, is there convergence or divergence of ends between the two IOs? Second, do their means converge or diverge? We applied the ensuing conjectures to specific cases of dyadic IO interaction consisting of the EU on the one side and the IMF, NATO, and the ECtHR on the other in response to three different crisis episodes.

It is important to note that this paper aimed to analyze "snapshots" of the immediate, crisis-driven interactions among IOs and deliberately did not focus on the longer-term relationships that have emerged through the subsequent iterations of interaction over time. This paper was interested in the conditions that shape the initial quality of interaction between IO dyads. By implication, this does not rule out that even if the initial, crisis-driven interaction between two IOs follows cooperative logics, a more conflictual relationship might emerge over time. All three cases analyzed in this paper provide interesting insights into these dynamics, which call for further research.

In the case of the EU and the IMF, despite continued close cooperation in the context of joint financial rescue packages, differences emerged between the two IOs regarding the preferred level of austerity. While the EU has insisted on continu-

ing a strict approach often requiring significant fiscal consolidation and structural reforms as conditions for ongoing financial assistance, the IMF's stance toward austerity has evolved over time, and only recently, IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva urged Europe not to endanger its economic recovery with "the suffocating force of austerity" (Koutsokosta 2021).

Although the EU–NATO case is certainly the most "initial" crisis-induced interaction so far, it is not unreasonable to expect that the initial division of labor will turn into conflict, especially if U.S. support for Ukraine disappears. The possible return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency and his potential undermining of NATO support could significantly alter the convergence of ends between the two IOs, ultimately threatening the division of labor that has been established since February 2022. If NATO's ability to complement the EU's geo-economic power with military capabilities is undermined, the division of labor between NATO and the EU could be threatened, potentially forcing the EU to reconsider its stance on generating its own military power. In such a scenario, the EU could face increased pressure to centralize military capabilities.

Finally, the EU–ECtHR case suggests that the opposite long-term trend is also possible and that competitive IO interaction may actually diminish over time. Looking at recent ECtHR rulings on "hot returns" and humanitarian visas, it appears that ECtHR jurisprudence pushing for an expansion of the human rights of migrants and refugees in Europe may be coming to an end (Thym 2020, p. 596). This "end of human rights dynamism" at the ECtHR (ibid.) may indicate an incremental convergence of ends leading to a shift from the previously dominating conflictual logic to cooperative forms of interaction between the EU and the ECtHR in the field of migrants' rights and asylum law. Crisis-induced interactions are by no means set in stone. The long-term evolution of crisis-induced relationships between IOs with institutional overlap is an important avenue for future research, which could be informed in particular by the literature on policy learning (Athey and Wager 2021; Bennett and Howlett 1992; Dunlop and Radaelli 2013, 2018), which offers a variety of fruitful theoretical insights into how IOs and their bureaucracies might learn and adapt their initial cooperative or conflictual dyadic crisis responses.

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