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IDEAS, BELIEFS AND NORMS: WHAT ROLE FOR INTERNATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY INSTITUTIONS?

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ABSTRACT

The research agenda on international parliamentary institutions (IPIs) is steadily expanding. This paper seeks to conceive an analytical framework to illustrate how IPIs engage in international affairs by shaping and promoting ideas and norms. More specifically, drawing on Finnemore and Sikkink's 1998 seminal work on the norm life cycle, this paper addresses three main issues, that is: 1) how ideas enter IPIs; 2) how parliamentary actors shape norms and policies; 3) how parliamentary actors spread norms, both within and outside their own communities of member states.

Keywords: international parliamentary institutions; norm life cycle; constructivism.

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1. Introduction

The interest towards international parliamentary institutions (IPIs[1]) and, more in general, the role of parliaments in international affairs is constantly growing, along with the expansion of their number, functions and importance in the international relations of a globalising world. It is well established in the literature, indeed, that setting up and empowering of IPIs represents one out of the three major ways through which parliamentarians engage in international affairs, along with strengthening their oversight capacity vis-à-vis national governments' foreign policy, and conducting parallel diplomatic relations (known as *parliamentary diplomacy*), either at the bilateral, multilateral or presidential level (Malamud and Stavridis 2011).

One of the most striking aspects of the development of these institutions is their huge variation in terms legal status, input legitimacy, functions and aims. Indeed, IPIs can be either attached to an international organisation or constituting one themselves; they can be either treaty-based institutions or informal networks of parliamentarians, whose members act in their private capacity; they can be either appointed by national legislatures or directly elected by universal suffrage; they may aim either to legitimise regional integration efforts, or to shape norms and policies through deliberation, or even to promote conflict resolutions through parliamentary diplomacy. As the number of IPIs increased and their variety expanded over time, the literature has produced accurate and analytically useful categorisations, ranging from parsimonious two-way typologies (Sabic 2008) to more sophisticated legal and functional approaches (Cutler 2001; Kissling 2011)[2].

The institutional variety displayed by IPIs inevitably entails major analytical problems. Since the beginning, indeed, the literature has shown a relative lack of consensus on the "explanandum", that is on what should be the fundamental unit of analysis around which to centre the research on IPI. In other words, if so many forms of IPIs exist, how can we conceive and, consequently, evaluate their "effectiveness" and "impact"? Which is/are the most appropriate theoretical framework(s) that can be applied to explore these dimensions? And, ultimately, how can we make sense of IPIs' role in international affairs?

The debate on these issues is still open in the literature. Accordingly, the goal of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it will offer a critical analysis of the main trajectories of the literature on IPIs, from

[1] In general terms, an IPI can be defined as an institution in which "parliamentarians co-operate with a view to formulating their interests, adopting decisions, strategies or programs, which they implement or promote, formally and informally, in interactions with other actors, by various means such as persuasion, advocacy or institutional pressure" (Sabic 2008: 258).

[2] Discussing these works goes beyond the scope of this paper. A comparative analysis of these definitions and categorisations is contained in Cofelice 2015.

the first empirical studies to the most recent constructivist approaches. Secondly, it will seek to identify possible elements for new research agendas that may help to fully catch the wide array of IPIs' aims, activities and functions.

2. From international relations theories to positivist empirical approaches

The first literature streams dealing with IPIs were actually less interested in the "effectiveness" problem, and much more driven by normative concerns. Until the 1990s, indeed, "world federalism" and "cosmopolitan democracy", both inspired by Kant's *Perpetual Peace*, were the only schools of thought that, at least indirectly, addressed IPIs as international actors and tried to project their role in the future (Sabic 2013). More specifically, their common aim was to outline a structure of the global order and a set of principles that would expand and sustain democratic governance, the rule of law and constitutionalism across national borders.

After all, these concerns are strictly connected with the actual foundation of IPIs, which originally derives from a wish to promote the creation of a permanent institutional structure for the peaceful settlement of international disputes. In its earliest plans, indeed, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the first IPI established in 1889, should have served mainly as an arbitrator in disputes among States (Zarjevski 1989). This means that there is a link with conflict resolution from its commencement; hence an international relations concern from the start (Cofelice and Stavridis 2014).

Accordingly, both the above-mentioned normative approaches include the creation of a "global parliament" as a long-term goal, since it would provide the necessary legitimacy to the constitutional global order. However, while world federalists are more concerned with exploring the conditions under which the development of a world parliament becomes a realistic option (Levi 1993 and 2001; Baratta 2004), cosmopolitan democrats seem to accept that this plan may not be realised in the near future, and thus turn their attention to the practice of existing parliamentary institutions and the creation of regional parliaments everywhere in the world as legitimate and independent sources of law (Held 1995; Archibugi and Held 1995; Marchetti 2008).

The literature has started to deal with IPIs in empirical terms especially in the first half of 2000s. Early works were particularly concerned with scrutinising what these new actors in International Relations can do, i.e. their functions and powers in the framework of policy and decision-making processes of regional international organisations (Slaughter 2004; Marschall 2007; De Puig 2008).

Once again, this academic interest was driven by the historical evolution process of IPIs. During the Cold-War period, indeed, the proliferation of IPIs was associated with the phenomenon of regional integration, which includes parliaments as part of a regional "internal" process and the need for its accountability, legitimisation and, potentially, democratic dimension. As a consequence, IPIs have sought to acquire formal powers that mirror the traditional core competences exercised by legislatures at national level, namely: representation, oversight and law/policy-making.

Early empirical works, however, tended to consider only a small number of the currently existing IPIs: this was especially true for the European Parliament (EP) and few other European

institutions. Undoubtedly, being the most institutionally and functionally developed IPI, the EP allowed scholars to develop a rich array of theoretical arguments and hypotheses on its evolution and institutional dynamics. In particular, these issues have been tackled first and foremost by the new institutionalism literature (Hall and Taylor 1996). Within this literature, the main schools of thought, i.e. rational choice, constructivism and neo-functionalism, have managed to formulate three alternative hypotheses concerning the EP's empowerment: the "efficiency-enhancing hypothesis" (Hix 2002); the "policy-seeking hypothesis" (Pollack 1997 and 2003; Bräuninger et al. 2001); and the "legitimacy-seeking hypothesis" (Moravcsik 1998; Moravcsik and Nicolaidis 1999; Rittberger 2005; Rittberger and Schimmelfennig 2006)[3].

Without going in much details, it is sufficient here to say that both the efficiency- and the policy-seeking hypotheses are based on rational choice assumptions, according to which, social and political actors, having a fixed set of preferences, create or change institutions entirely instrumentally, so as to maximise the attainment of these preferences, and do so in a highly strategic manner that presumes extensive calculation (Hall and Taylor 1996: 942-946). By contrast, the legitimacy-seeking hypothesis draws on sociological institutionalism, which, putting "cultural practices" at the heart of its concern, claims that international organisations embrace specific institutional forms or practices not necessarily to enhance means-ends efficiency, but mainly because they are widely valued and socially legitimated within a broader cultural environment (Hall and Taylor 1996: 946-950).

On the other hand, the literature on the majority of other IPIs has long remained scarce and largely descriptive. The main rationale behind this lack of interest is that IPIs, with the exception of the EP, are generally considered as weak institutions, on the margins of policy and decision-making processes. Slaughter, for instance, argued that they may have some success in certain areas (e.g. in addressing the "democratic deficit" in trade organisations, or as catalysts for regional co-operation), but generally they "exercise little official power and rarely find themselves in situations where they can use the mechanisms of soft power – information exchange, deliberation, persuasion – with much impact" (Slaughter 2004: 122). As a result, our knowledge about their establishment, evolution, institutional and functional organisation has long remained rather limited and fragmented.

Since the mid-2000s, scholars have definitely broken with Eurocentric approach and successfully managed to contextualise IPIs' role in the multilevel global governance and regionalisation processes. This was mainly due to the "comparative turn" in the study of regionalism. In the current literature, indeed, regions tend to be increasingly compared in relation to their genesis, growth, institutional design and effectiveness, across time, space and forms of organisation. From a methodological point of view, the comparative factor is considered by several scholars as "one of the core characteristics of the current phase in the study of regionalism, perhaps its most important one" (Soderbaum 2016: 32).

Accordingly, several scholars have begun to apply their expertise in specific regional contexts to pioneer comparative studies concerning the degree of parliamentarisation of different regional international organisations, especially between those in Europe and Latin America (Malamud

[3] For a detailed discussion of these hypotheses, see Cofelice 2018: 14-22.

2004, 2005; Malamud and de Sousa 2007; Dri 2009, 2010; Malamud and Stavridis 2011; Malamud and Schmitter 2011), but also from Europe and Africa (Demeke 2004; Terlinden 2004; Navarro 2010), Africa and the Middle East (Fawcett and Gandois 2010) and East-Asia and Latin America (Rüland and Bechle 2014).

The main added value of these studies consists in "de-freezing" some variables that the literature on neo-institutionalism, with its main focus on the EP, had understandably assumed as constants. Indeed, factors like democracy, type of democracy, level of development and homogeneity of development, that in the EU context either represent constants or display little variation, may play a significant role in shaping regional institutional designs and determining the role of IPIs in regions other than Europe.

Drawing on the results gained in these studies, the most recent literature has started to apply quantitative methods suited for both large- and intermediate-N research designs, with a view to producing more generalisable findings on two crucial aspects connected to IPIs, namely their establishment and empowerment process.

Firstly, why do (regional) international organisations establish IPIs? In a 2018 study, Rocabert and colleagues conducted logistic regression analyses on a sample of 73 international organisations, to identify whether international organisation *purpose* (i.e. general-purpose or task-specific organisations), *authority*[4], and *member state democracy* are conducive to the emergence and persistence of IPIs. The authors found a highly important relationship between the general-purpose character of international organisations and the emergence and persistence of IPIs, which holds independently of how democratic organisation's member states are. Moreover, the delegation of authority to international organisations, in contrast to their purpose, is not consistently associated to the existence of IPIs (Rocabert et al.: 25). These findings led the authors to explain the creation of IPIs as an attempt of member states to provide international organisations with democratic legitimacy, in response to demands and expectations of domestic actors and the international environment. While task-specific organisations do not require the representative and deliberative functions of parliaments, general-purpose organisations, based on open-ended contracts and community-building ambitions, need bodies such as IPIs that convey (at least) the impression of representing the peoples of an international community and of deliberating democratically on public policy (Rocabert et al.: 3). Thus, governments would tend to exploit the analogy of IPIs with national parliaments, the democratic institution par excellence, to project the image of democracy at international level.

Secondly, once established, what factors may promote (or inhibit) the empowerment of IPIs? In a recent work, after assessing through a "parliamentary powers index"[5] the extent to which IPIs have (measurable) influence on the outcome of regional international organisations' decision-making process, I have investigated the conditions under which the influence of IPIs is expected

[4] Here, the concept of international organisation "authority" refers to executive competences, agenda rights, and decision-making capabilities of organisation's secretariat.

[5] The parliamentary powers index is an additive index which is intended to evaluate the aggregate "strength" of IPIs, i.e. the influence they are able to exert in the decision-making process of regional international organisations. It builds upon five discrete categories, i.e. consultative, legislative, oversight, appointment and budgetary functions, each of which is rated on a scale ranging from 0 to 5. For a detailed discussion of this index, see Cofelice 2018: chapter 3.

to grow (Cofelice 2018). More specifically, the analysis carried out on 22 IPIs mainly from European, African and Latin American regional international organisations revealed the existence of at least three different "roads" to the empowerment of IPIs, which are determined by a combination of both national domestic factors and regional organisations' designs. Indeed, while the regional design determines the presence (or absence) of the necessary structural conditions conducive to IPIs' empowerment (namely "delegation" of executive authority to a supranational institutions, and "depth" of the integration achieved), domestic factors, such as democracy and parliamentary regime, affect the causal mechanisms of this process, i.e. the kind of pathway that IPIs may follow to become empowered.

3. Towards a constructivist research agenda

Positivist empirical approaches have considerably improved our understanding of the functioning of most IPIs, including their establishment and empowerment processes. Alongside these merits, however, Sabic (2013) identifies a serious selection bias affecting these positivist works in at least two ways.

Firstly, driven by "effectiveness" concerns, positivist works have largely focused on IPIs' *formal powers*, while generally neglecting their *informal* and *soft-power* mechanisms (such as information exchange, deliberation, persuasion) that do not always have an immediate and visible effect, but that often represent the main *raison d'être* of many parliamentary institutions. Secondly, by "measuring" the performance of IPIs through their formal powers, this literature tended to consider only a small number of the IPIs that currently exist, namely those that are part of (regional) international organisations (Sabic 2013).

Such positivist approaches are particularly unsatisfying during the current era of a globalised/globalising world. While in the Cold War era states were the key actors that determined the dynamics of interactions in the international community, and IPIs could at best perform oversight and/or legitimating functions vis-à-vis inter-governmental policy- and decision-making processes, today parliamentarians participate in international relations not exclusively through formal institutions, but also through informal transnational networks. As a consequence, the bulk of their activities has begun to shift from formal parliamentary functions to less conventional tasks. A non-exhaustive list includes: conducting parallel diplomatic relations (known as parliamentary diplomacy); acting as moral tribunes; lobbying governments and national legislatures to adopt specific policies or ratify international instruments; providing democratic institution building and technical assistance programmes; upholding confidence building and parliamentary socialisation.

As a consequence, in order to overcome this selection bias and to understand the development of IPIs as a really global phenomenon, Sabic proposes to give up this positivist approach exclusively focused on "effectiveness" concerns, and to rather look at "the environment in which IPIs operate, […] the factors which influence their activities, and […] the potential IPIs (may) have to become recognizable players in international affairs" (Sabic 2013: 20).

Following this new research pathway, some scholars have begun to provide ample empirical evidence of IPIs acting in international affairs as *actors on their own initiative*, and not only in the

framework of decision-making processes of international organisations. More specifically, it has been recognised that IPIs may act as prime movers, path breakers, agenda setters, norm entrepreneurs, policy advocates, etc. (Stavridis 2017): that is to say, they have a role to play in shaping and promoting *ideas, beliefs* and *norms*.

As a consequence, constructivist theories of international relations (Wendt 1992; Katzenstein 1996), by emphasising the role of the social environment, norms, identities and ideas in determining the behaviour of individuals and other social actors, appear to be an ideal point of departure to embrace the broader spectrum of IPIs' aims and activities.

Despite this acknowledgment, what is still missing in the literature is a coherent framework of analysis that, drawing on constructivist assumptions, may help explaining how IPIs can be involved in normative and ideational processes. Therefore, in what follows I will seek to conceive an analytical framework to illustrate how IPIs are able to shape and promote ideas and norms, thus moving beyond the traditional positivist approach. More specifically, drawing on Finnemore and Sikkink's 1998 seminal work on the *norm life cycle*, the remaining part of the paper addresses three main issues, that is: 1) how ideas enter IPIs; 2) how parliamentary actors shape norms and policies; 3) how parliamentary actors spread norms, both within and outside their own communities of member states

3.1 How ideas enter IPIs: the role of "norm entrepreneurs"

IPIs can be analysed first and foremost as battlefields for the emergence of ideas and norms, or, using Finnemore and Sikkink's words, as a "highly contested normative space", where new norms must systematically compete with other norms and perceptions of interest. Generally speaking, Finnemore and Sikkink identify two elements that seem to play a crucial role in the successful creation of most new norms: *norm entrepreneurs* and *organisational platforms* from which entrepreneurs act.

Firstly, as to the role of norm entrepreneurs, the two authors clarify that norms "do not appear out of thin air; they are actively built by agents having strong notions about appropriate or desirable behavior in their community" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 896). These agents may adopt different political strategies to convince a critical mass of other relevant actors (defined as "norm leaders") to embrace new norms; however, the dominant mechanism is *persuasion*, especially through the role of language and dominant social discourses.

When considering IPIs, three main types of norm entrepreneurs may be identified: individual entrepreneurs (including political leaders and institutional actors, such as IPIs' speakers, presidents and secretary generals), national delegations and (when existing[6]) political groups. Unfortunately, with few exception (Drummond 2013; Giannitti and Lupo 2017; Shemer-Kunz 2017), the role of these actors as norm agents is still one of the most under-researched areas in the study of IPIs.

[6] The existence of political groups seems to be a phenomenon that mainly affects European and, to a lesser extent, Latin American institutions: see Cofelice 2018: 66-69.

Secondly, IPIs are also relevant in terms of organisational platforms from which parliamentary norm entrepreneurs act. Generally speaking, "all norm promoters at the international level need some kind of organizational platform from and through which they promote their norms. Sometimes these platforms are constructed specifically for the purpose of promoting the norm, as are many nongovernmental organizations" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 899). This holds true also for IPIs, especially for task-specific transnational networks of parliamentarians. Sabic, for instance, investigated the efforts made by the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons and Parliamentarians for Global Action to support, respectively, the emerging legal framework for limiting the arms trade especially in Europe and Central America, and the establishment of the International Criminal Court (Sabic 2008).

However, norm entrepreneurs often work "from standing international organizations that have purposes and agendas other than simply promoting one specific norm" (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 899). These general-purpose IPIs with "other agendas" may significantly influence the behaviour of parliamentary norm agents, through both formal and informal rules. As to formal rules, an example is represented by the kind of majority required to pass parliamentary acts. While several IPIs adopt a combination of simple, absolute and special majorities, according to the nature of the act under discussion, other parliamentary institutions pass their acts almost exclusively by the consensus rule (e.g.: Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States; Parliamentary Assembly of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries; Pan-African Parliament), i.e. two mechanisms that normally characterises the decision-making process of intergovernmental institutions. The choice of adopting consensual procedures risks to seriously hamper the capacity of action of norm entrepreneurs within these IPIs, especially when they are applied to large assemblies such as the Pan-African Parliament, with its 265 members from 47 countries (Navarro 2010).

Among informal rules, IPIs' "working culture" or "role conception" (Harnisch 2011) may play a key influence on the behaviour of norm entrepreneurs. As an example of this, the different role conceptions between the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) is among the key factors explaining the divergent approach of their members vis-à-vis the Arab uprisings between 2011 and 2016 (Cofelice 2016). Indeed, drawing on the EP's self-image as the "democratic conscience of Europe" (being the only directly elected institution of the European Union) and its history of outspoken support for democracy, human rights, and European values, especially during the Cold War period (Reinprecht and Levin 2015), MEPs adopted a "moral tribune" role, by expressing broad rhetorical support to protestors and contributing to a wider acceptance of the still emerging responsibility-to-protect concept. By contrast, PAM's role conception is substantially different: "the spirit of PAM is to create dialogue and respect differences of opinion, and [...] no single Member State will ever be condemned under the auspices of PAM"[7]. Consistent with this approach, PAM has never taken a clear and univocal stance on Arab uprisings, but has rather preferred to get involved in various initiatives of parliamentary diplomacy and mediation, including facilitating UN missions and conveying

[7] PAM President Rudy Salles (France), quoted in *Executive Report of PAM's Fourth Plenary Session*, Istanbul, Turkey, 23 – 24 October 2009, www.pam.int/welcome.asp?m=documents&a=cat&cid=172.

messages from European leadership to the representatives of southern Mediterranean countries' governments and parliaments.

Future research work may be interested in identifying additional formal and informal organisational factors able to influence the success of parliamentary norm entrepreneurs.

3.2 How parliamentary actors shape norms and policies: the "quality of deliberation"

As already mentioned, especially in the context of general-purpose IPIs, norms and policies are mainly shaped through debates and deliberation. Thus, assessing the mechanisms and the "quality" of deliberation may be highly relevant, especially because, unlike other oversight and policy-making functions (which are an asset only of a small group of IPIs established within regional international organisations), deliberation still represents a core function of the vast majority of IPIs.

Interestingly, the literature has already begun to tackle this specific issue and to produce some useful analytical frameworks. In particular, drawing on the broader literature on deliberation, Delputte and Williams (2016) developed a coherent framework based on five main criteria that are considered as necessary in order to arrive at valid norms or legitimate outcomes. These criteria are: 1) *participation*, concerning the inclusion of all relevant affected parties; 2) *openness*, in order to allow for a free and transparent public debate and scrutiny; 3) *common good*: it refers to whether deliberation is guided mainly by a sense of empathy and solidarity, allowing participants to consider the wellbeing of others and the community at large, or rather by purely narrow constituencies' interests; 4) *constructive politics*, i.e. the ability to reach a general reasoned or argumentative consensus, instead of imposing one-sided views of the world or moral values; 5) *power neutralising mechanisms*, i.e. the existence of adequate rules of procedure allowing not only stronger actors, but also less powerful ones to effectively contribute to argumentation and deliberation (Delputte and Williams 2016: 493-495). These five criteria are then operationalised into sub-questions and corresponding empirical indicators.

Subsequently, the authors apply this analytical framework to evaluate the quality of deliberation in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) – EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly's debate dealing with the highly salient issue of economic partnership agreements. Despite the overwhelming consensus reached on this kind of agreements within the Joint Assembly, the authors conclude that real dialogue between different parties is not always guaranteed, due to a number of recurrent critical issues across the different criteria (Delputte and Williams 2016: 502-503).

3.3 How parliamentary actors spread norms: inter-institutional bargaining, socialisation and norm diffusion

Once ideas enter IPIs and norms and policies are shaped by parliamentary actors through persuasion, argumentation and deliberation, in order to become relevant for the public realm norms have to be spread outside the institutional boundaries of IPIs. This third and final stage of the norm life cycle usually occurs at two levels, which may become three if parliamentary institutions are embedded within (regional) international organisations.

Within such organisations, indeed, a first level may entail an inter-institutional bargaining between IPIs and intergovernmental institutions, i.e. the key international norm leaders. Scholars like Kreppel (2002 and 2003), Stacey and Rittberger (2003), Schimmelfennig (2003), Costa and Magnette (2003) have explored the tools and strategies adopted by IPIs either to induce favourable concessions from member States, or to directly sway intergovernmental negotiations in their favour. More specifically, this literature has identified two main strategies that IPIs may adopt to increase their chances of success in inter-institutional negotiations.

Firstly, IPIs' positions may be backed up by other community institutions. For instance, securing strategic alliances with supranational and/or judicial bodies may represent an enhancing factor for IPIs' strategy: especially judicial bodies, through their primary rulings, may indeed play a fundamental role in transforming parliamentary demands into valid and legitimate sources of authority for other institutions and the international organisation as a whole. Secondly, the literature has sought to identify the conditions under which IPIs may have some room for manoeuvre to constrain governments' beliefs and preferences during inter-institutional negotiations, including the presence of adequate windows of opportunity; the favourable predisposition of national leaders who are socialised in national contexts characterised by the constitutional parliamentary model; the absence of other credible alternatives etc.

While these strategies and conditions have been largely applied to the analysis of the European Parliament case, a more recent attempt has been made to test them also to non-European contexts, namely Parlasur, Nordic Council and OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (Cofelice 2018: 168-177). Although additional research is needed, preliminary findings seem to confirm their validity to a relatively good extent.

More in general, however, IPIs may be actively involved in spreading the adopted norms and policies within the community of member states, and sometimes even outside this community, towards third countries or other international organisation.

When the community of member states is at stake, the process of spreading norms is generally labelled as "socialisation", which can be defined as:

> […] a process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community. Its outcome is sustained compliance based on the internalization of these new norms. In adopting community rules, socialization implies that an agent switches from following logic of consequences to logic of appropriateness; this adoption is sustained over time and is quite independent of a particular structure of material incentives or sanctions (Checkel 2005: 804).

The literature has already recognised the substantial contribution that different IPIs have made, for instance, to the socialisation processes in Europe (i.e. "Europeanisation") through the use of soft mechanisms such as peer-pressure, training and skill-development. In this sense, Flockhart (2004) focused on NATO Parliamentary Assembly's "Rose-Roth seminars", which were used to socialise parliamentarians from former socialist countries into "Western" norms, exploiting the window of opportunity represented by the post-1989 collapse of socialist systems, when parliamentarians from the East found themselves in an "ideational vacuum". Similarly, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has initially focused on these "newcomers",

through both a pre-membership assessment of states' compliance with core European norms and values on human rights, and a post-accession monitoring procedure, which include monitoring dialogues, periodic reviews and specific reports on the functioning of domestic democratic institutions (Roter 2017)[8].

On the other hand, when IPIs divert their norm-spreading role towards third countries or other international organisation, a different conceptual and analytical tool should be evoked. Besides empirical studies on "parliamentary diplomacy"[9] (Fiott 2011; Stavridis 2013; Stavridis and Jancic 2017) and the role of inter-regional parliamentary assemblies as "transmission belts" for the diffusion of norms and values (Cofelice 2012; Delputte 2013), the most relevant theoretical argument has been developed so far in the realm of the "diffusion theory" (Holzinger and Knill 2005; Lenz 2013; Jetschke and Lenz 2013). Originally focusing on channels of influence between regional international organisations, this analytical perspective rejects the conventional assumption that these organisations are atomistic entities taking decisions largely in isolation from each other, and considers the universe of regional organisations as a social structure or community, linked by a variety of both direct and indirect ties, which lead, through various mechanisms, to interdependent decision-making processes.

The added value of this analytical approach is that it offers a clear set of assumptions and causal mechanisms according to which the gradual diffusion of norms and ideational models can be expected among international organisations and institutions. These include: the existence of historical, cultural and economic ties; an initial status difference in terms of economic or other relevant factors; the presence of windows of opportunities represented by changes in the international environment combined with a major political and economic crisis at regional or national level, that produced conditions of high uncertainty; the presence of international actors spurring norms coupled by local actors ready to back and adapt those norms to the local contexts.

However, even though the diffusion theory offers useful theoretical handholds, only recently it has started to be used by scholars working on IPIs, especially to explore possible processes of norm diffusion between the European Parliament and some African IPIs, namely the Inter-parliamentary Committee of the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the Community Parliament of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (Cofelice 2018), and the ECOWAS Parliament (Rocabert et al. 2018).

4. Conclusions

This paper represents a first effort to conceive a holistic and systematic analytical framework to fully catch the role (as well as the limits) of IPIs in the different stages of norm life cycle. The analysis, indeed, sought to shed light on: 1) how ideas enter IPIs, by looking at the role of parliamentary norm entrepreneurs and the influence exerted by institutional platforms' formal and informal rules; 2) how parliamentary actors shape norms and policies, through argumentation

[8] Whereas these activities of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe were largely used for the new democracies, their role has recently been extended to periodically cover all member states.
[9] For a definition of parliamentary diplomacy, see Stavridis and Jancic 2017: 6.

and deliberation; 3) how parliamentary actors spread norms, both within their own community of member states (through inter-institutional bargaining and socialisation processes) and eventually towards external actors (drawing on the assumptions and causal mechanisms developed by the diffusion theory).

The analysis also allowed to reveal significant gaps in the literature: for instance, the role of individual parliamentary entrepreneurs, national delegations and political groups in promoting the emergence of ideas and norms within IPIs is largely under-researched, and the potential of diffusion theory assumptions to understanding how norms "travel" among different IPIs is still not yet fully exploited. By contrast, in other research areas, such as the quality of deliberation and socialisation mechanisms, the literature has already provided adequate theoretical and analytical frameworks to produce solid empirical results.

What is important to stress here is that all the theoretical pathways and empirical examples provided in the above analysis should not be understood in isolation, or simply as a way to prove the potential of IPIs to emerge as fully-fledged actors in international relations, but rather as a "challenge for future investigation in this area" (Sabic 2013): the debate on these issues is just at the beginning.

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