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Obstacles to collective action during a crisis: A meta-organizational perspective

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Abstract

Meta-organizations form to advance collective action. But collective action can be more difficult to coordinate for meta-organizations comprising governmental agencies or sovereign states, with system-level objectives often conflicting. These challenges can be more binding during a crisis, where the responses called for are outside of the original reason for the meta-organization's existence. We advance a framework for conceptualizing meta-organizations that focuses on both internal attributes and external perceptions and suggests how each may help or hinder meta-organization influence during a crisis. Using as a case study the response of the European Union (EU) to COVID-19 and, specifically, to air travel restrictions at the outbreak of the pandemic, we show how meta-organizations can have difficulties in responding expeditiously to crises, particularly when encountering contradictory system-level goals. We argue that meta-organizations must plan for crises during less turbulent times, developing the processes that contribute to the gradual creation of new system-level goals.

KEYWORDS
collective action, COVID-19, crisis, European Union, meta-organization

INTRODUCTION

Meta-organizations are organizations of organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), comprising collective bodies associating voluntarily rather than contractually (Berkowitz et al., 2022). Examples include business or trade associations like the American Chamber of Commerce or the European Banking Federation (Berkowitz et al., 2022; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Lawton, Rajwani, & Minto, 2018). Meta-organizations can also include governmental structures, such as federative states or intergovernmental and supranational organizations,[1] including the European Union (EU), the International Air Transport Association (IATA), and the World Health Organization (WHO) (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016; Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Kerwer, 2013).

A key theme of the growing literature on meta-organizations has focused on the centrality of collective action to the meta-organization's organizational purpose (Aspers, 2016; Brankovic, 2018). Increasing evidence suggests that meta-organizations can perform an essential role in dealing with collective issues facing members through coordination and leveraging economies of scale (Berkowitz & Dumez, 2016; Reveley & Ville, 2010) or by forging a common bond based on, or leading to, collective identity and cooperation around shared goals (Spillman, 2018).

Conversely, there is a paucity of evidence regarding the actual contribution of meta-organizations in dealing with collective issues via concerted action. Dumez and Renou (2020) note that a tension exists within a meta-organization between the search for consensus and the capabilities within the meta-organization. This tension can stymie collective action. Similarly, Garaudel (2020) notes that there may be a divergence between a meta-organization's secretariat and its members, also limiting the scope

[1]We understand intergovernmental to involve shared decision-making and collective action between sovereign members, whereas supranational implies power and authority above and beyond the (nation) state. As we show below, the EU combines elements of both intergovernmental and supranational authority.

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for collective responses. The fact that member organizations can leave, impose constraints via formal and informal procedures, or ignore the meta-organization altogether due to the absence of any contractual authority renders collective action difficult relative to standard organizational forms (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012).

These issues can be exacerbated during a crisis, as the meta-organization grapples with its limitations in compelling action, the dispersion of interests under its umbrella, and general unpreparedness or surprise. Meta-organizational response to crises has only been discussed peripherally (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016) and is grounded mostly in crisis management and political science thinking. This work has focused more on how individual countries—or even agglomerations of countries—collaborate on pressing issues of mutual interest (Blondin & Boin, 2020; Bravo-Laguna, 2021), rather than exploring the organizational form that enables or hinders this cooperation. The exception to this rule is the research that has focused specifically on crisis management in meta-organizations, but even this work has examined longer term challenges rather than collective action in response to immediate and acute crises (Berkowitz, Crowder, & Brooks, 2020; Chaudhury et al., 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in the literature and explore if meta-organizations underperform during times of unanticipated (transnational) crisis and uncertainty, when the pooling of resources is expedient, and swift and decisive collective action is warranted. Our proposition is that the collective decision-making issues and impediments inherent in a supranational meta-organization are magnified during a crisis, where stated system-level goals are unclear and may diverge significantly between members. This can result in divergent perceptions and positions on the necessity for and extent of collective action. In a crisis, autonomy in pursuit of perceived safe routes to survival is often more important than other meta-goals, meaning collective action is even more challenging to achieve.

As context for understanding the answer to these questions, we examine the actions of the EU during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU, as a collection of sovereign states and an institutional framework for action by these states, acts as a meta-organization (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Seidl, 2016). As part of its balancing act of powers, the secretariat of the meta-organization, the European Commission (EC), is delegated certain competencies by its member states under which it can act, allowing for economies of scale and amplification of resources. At the same time, other functions remain within the purview of its members, imposing extensive constraints on the meta-organization and restricting its agility. These contradictions became apparent during the preliminary phase of the pandemic, as the EU undertook both limited and often fruitless efforts to coordinate member state cross-border public policy responses in a specific policy area, namely, air travel. This scenario exposed the shortcomings of both intergovernmental and meta-organizational cooperation, with collective action hobbled due to the inherent traits of the EU as a meta-organization.

This paper advances a framework of how meta-organizations generate influence, arguing that the supranational limitations of meta-organizations can be amplified during a crisis. Organization studies research shows that a meta-organizational approach is more appropriate for understanding the stasis in collective EU decision-making that accompanies a crisis. It appears that a meta-organization cannot add a new system-level goal extemporaneously in a crisis environment, leading to substantial collective action obstacles. It may even be prevented from preparing in advance for a possible crisis if the meta-organization does not have the delegated powers or internal organizational capabilities to develop structures for crisis management (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018).

The main contribution of this study is to provide insight into the limited part played by meta-organizations in dealing expeditiously with collective and unexpected challenges, exemplified here by the COVID-19 pandemic but by no means limited to it. In contrast to much of the existing literature, this study develops an integrative process framework to illustrate how a meta-organizational configuration such as the EU, dependent upon its members for new actions outside of its original scope, would *necessarily* render decision-making—and by extension, collective action—problematic and slow during a crisis. We also extend prior research by integrating disconnected, disciplinary-based literature and addressing how specific internal drivers determine how a meta-organization can influence its members' spatial, political, and regulatory contexts. In doing so, we reveal areas in need of further exploration and more rigorous empirical testing to evaluate our integrated framework of meta-organizational characteristics and to understand their influence.

META-ORGANIZATION CONCEPTS AND CONSTRUCTS

Meta-organizations and collective action

Meta-organizations consist of networks of firms, sovereign states, associations, or other organizations, bound by a shared system-level goal but formalized within their own organizational vehicle (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008; Aspers, 2016; Brankovic, 2018). A persistent challenge in meta-organization research has been setting parameters: What is, and what is not, a meta-organization? If we deploy the definitions describing meta-organizations as collectives of other organizations characterized by a system-level goal (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012; Valente & Oliver, 2018), we can cast the metaphorical net relatively wide. Conceptually and practically, the classification falls into two categories of

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meta-organizations: formal meta-organizations like trade associations, multi-partner alliances, corporations, or even sports clubs (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005, 2008), and informal meta-organizations like franchise networks or open communities such as Wikipedia (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012). This conception can be extended further to encompass the spheres in which various meta-organizations act (Brès, Raufflet, & Boghossian, 2018): Although much of the management literature has (not surprisingly) been focused on commercial meta-organizations, federative states such as the United States or Germany or international and intergovernmental entities including the EU and the WHO also fit the description of a meta-organization, with their membership other sovereign states or governments rather than individuals.

Regardless of their sphere of operations, the primary aim of both formal and informal meta-organizations is to enhance collective action among organizations. This reality is the principal congruence of Ahrne and Brunsson (2008) and Gulati, Puranam, and Tushman's (2012) categorization of meta-organization. The formal–informal bifurcation is somewhat blurred in trade associations, typically part of an established institutional environment but heavily reliant on relationships and the network effect for influence and impact (Oliver, 1990; Thorelli, 1986). Building on such observations, Gulati, Puranam, and Tushman (2012) highlighted what we could call the activity of meta-organizing, that is, all informal (networks) and formal (institutionalized) collective action among organizations.

Numerous meta-organization characteristics identified in the configuration, stakeholder, and institutional literatures (centralization, resource availability, cohesion, task specialization, reputation, legitimacy, and status) lend themselves directly to creating influence (Table 1). However, there is a paucity of analysis on how these attributes translate into influence and where this influence is directed. From an institutional perspective, the overriding purpose of organizing collective action is to change the game's rules in favor of the collective (DiMaggio, 1988; North, 1991). Intended outcomes include favorable rules and norms on tax, employment practices, environmental outcomes (Lawrence, 1999), or, as King and Lenox (2000) and Lawton and McGuire (2003) note, collective industry action to manage self-regulation. Tucker (2008, p. 3) also notes that trade associations, as a form of meta-organization, have a self-regulatory function, embodying shared values, articulating standard norms, and coalescing around shared interests such as lighter regulation or more positive media coverage. He further notes that trade associations work to expand the spaces where self-regulation may replace onerous burdens from the outside.

Drawing on these attributes and prior work, we adopt seven key characteristics of meta-organization structural configuration to highlight the influence on members (synthesized in Figure 1). The framework begins on the left with four tangible, specific characteristics (resource, task specialization, centralization, and cohesion) that collectively configure the meta-organization's structure and determine its position in the field (Barley, 2010; Rajwani, Lawton, & Phillips, 2015). Tangible, specific characteristics remain key to meta-organizations, particularly the resource allocation process. Guided by theoretical arguments from the resource-based view (RBV), as well as resource mobilization theory and the theory of the firm, prior studies have offered several pathways on the implications of organizational resources for meta-organizations. Selznick (1949) argued that organizations have the ability to develop key competencies by acquiring external resources to support central tasks by co-optation, whereas Frączkiewicz-Wronka and Szymaniec (2012) note that public organizations have a comparative advantage in building valuable and scarce resources. The meta-organization gets access to both direct resources, such as financial fees, and indirect resources, like members' social capital and human and material resources including political capital (see Lawton et al., 2014).

Unlike most individual-based organizations, resource allocation processes in meta-organizations develop

TABLE 1 Meta-organization characteristics.

Organizational dimensions	**Definitions**
Task specialization	Tasks are the appropriate modules and interfaces specified to create coordination and allow more efficient communication.
Cohesion	Cohesion is the organizational structures that exist between individuals, groups, and organizations. It is how, and the extent to which, meta-organizations integrate diverse interest areas.
Resource Availability	Resources and capabilities include organizational processes and attributes, information, and knowledge that enable meta-organizations to enhance their performance.
Centralization	Centralization is the optimal allocation of decision-making authority at the higher level. In contrast, decentralization is the transfer of authority to the lower level of the organization through delegation.
Reputation	Reputation is the general estimation in which the public holds one. Moreover, it is the aggregation of individual images of an organization that crystalizes into members' reputational orderings.
Legitimacy	Legitimacy is a perception or assumption that an entity's activities are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs.
Status	Status is intimately linked to deference and is understood as a measure of social standing relative to others in terms of a signal of quality.

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through parliamentary-style voting systems, which can raise a number of issues. For instance, König, Schulte, and Enders (2012) contend that, because strategic decisions and resource commitment are most dependent on the organizational members, which typically have access to greater resources than the meta-organization, members may refuse to give more resources or power to the meta-organization, which may in turn find it difficult to create an identity of its own. The basis of this ability is thus not formal authority rooted in an employment relationship, but the bargaining power these meta-organizations can exert relative to members. Meta-organizations that have more knowledge, expertise, reputation, and other resources tend to have higher bargaining power, as in the case of meta-organizations contained in sovereign states such as the EU. For instance, unlike in Washington, D.C., lobbying processes in Brussels are technocratic, with expert lobbyists and expert officials building up knowledge-based relationships and trust over time (Radaelli, 1999).

Moreover, in meta-organizations, there is an inherent similarity of goal or purpose between members and the organization to which they belong, which does not exist in individual-based organizations. Perhaps paradoxically, however, members also have a need for task specialization within the meta-organization, as "organizations are more differentiated than individuals […because the] very *raison d'être* of organizations is based on the idea that they have a special task or a special competence and that they are not like any other organization" (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008, p. 59). This is a key tenet of collective action, as specialization presupposes that the meta-organization is a vehicle for actions that members could not undertake on their own. Implicit in Figure 1, thus, is the assumption that collective action and the steps leading to degrees of influence are done with the acquiescence of members toward a shared system-level goal, that is, that the vehicle of the meta-organization is used for objectives and in ways that members agree on.

In terms of centralization and cohesion, the literature also assumes that meta-organizations are characterized by compositional dynamics defined by these system-level goals. The center of the meta-organization is the organizational form, which acts as the agent of the members, who are the principals within the system (as they pay membership fees) (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). Consequently, decision-making is determined by the members and transmitted up to the agent (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Kerwer, 2013), thus creating high a level of cohesion among and within meta-organizations.

However, meta-organizations are also characterized by perpetual tensions over autonomy between the meta-organization itself and its organized constituent members (Kerwer, 2013), as it is difficult for meta-organizations to assess members' performance or punish non-compliance through expulsion (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). These collective decision-making issues and impediments inherent in a supranational meta-organization can be magnified when the meta-organization or its members are under stress. Indeed, during a crisis, where stated system-level goals are unclear and may diverge significantly between members, a meta-organization may find itself subject to divergent perceptions and positions on the necessity for and extent of collective action. In a crisis, autonomy in pursuit of perceived safe routes to survival is often more

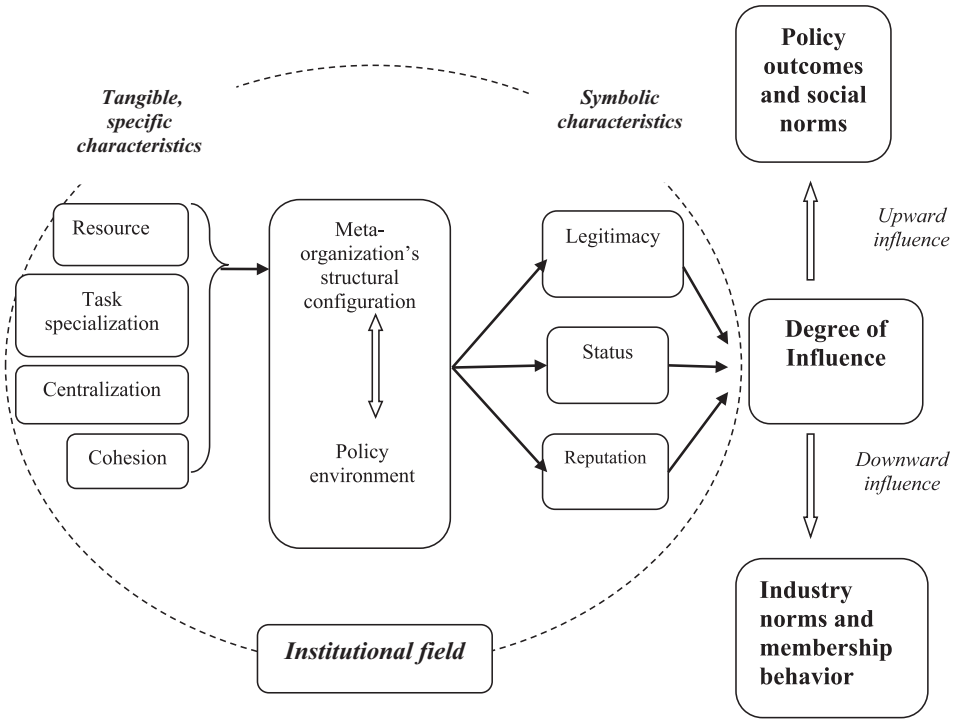


FIGURE 1 An integrated framework of meta-organization influence.

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important than other meta-goals, meaning collective action is even more challenging to achieve. Cohesion as shown in Figure 1 is thus not only related to the specific administrative characteristics of a meta-organization (capabilities versus consensus) but is also dependent on temporal characteristics as well.

The second component of the institutional field—symbolic characteristics including legitimacy, status, and reputation—derives from the nature of the meta-organizational structure and environment and arises from ongoing interaction. In some instances, the more prominent a meta-organization is in a specific policy domain (derived from the shared nature of goals), the greater its legitimacy, status, and reputation are likely to be. The right of membership, membership itself, and compliance with specific rules and standards can create legitimacy and status for potential or active members relative to other organizations (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005). In other meta-organizations, reputation may derive from the ability to undertake multiple actions simultaneously in multiple domains (that is, through demonstrating the capabilities of a "normal" organization). In this case, the meta-organization's reputation is less about doing one thing well and more about being able to galvanize action in many different areas at once. There is also a measure of endogeneity here as legitimacy and reputation may create the conditions for mobilizing into new areas, with the imprimatur of the meta-organization all that is required to convince members to adopt new system-level goals. On the other hand, even meta-organizations that have high levels of legitimacy and reputation may be unable to shift into new areas and in fact may damage their reputation by straying too far from their original goals.

Transnational and intergovernmental meta-organizations: The EU

The theoretical framework for a meta-organization, outlined in Figure 1, unpacks the different dynamics of meta-organization influence vis-à-vis its members. As highlighted in the literature, the concept of a meta-organization emerged to account for the different dynamics of collective action among organizations compared with individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). However, due to their idiosyncrasies, the current scope of the literature has mainly focused on commercially focused meta-organizations. But as Berkowitz and Dumez (2016) rightly note, sociology and political science have explored a large variety of meta-organizations such as federative political systems (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005), informal associations, and even international organizations that count sovereign nations as members, such as the EU.

Although the EU is a supranational organization first and foremost, it also has characteristics that can be understood more from the point of view of meta-organizations, as outlined in Figure 1 (Ahrne, Brunsson, & Garsten, 2000; Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Kerwer, 2013; Ahrne, Brunsson, & Kerwer, 2016). The EU is a formal organization with a collection of 27 individual member states, each with its own unique internal organizational structure and resources. EU members delegate resources and authority to the EU via their representatives. The EU also obtains access to both direct and indirect resources.

On policy initiation and development, the key EU institution is the EC, an organization dedicated to advancing the supranational interests of its members via a permanent bureaucratic architecture separate from the member states (Trondal, 2015), where staff have as their primary affiliation the international rather than the national level (Egeberg, 2012). The EC is the analog of the staff of a trade or business association,[2] charged with (especially since the early 1990s) policy management rather than policy initiation (Wille, 2013). However, the leadership (President) of the Commission can exert a strong influence on the topics at play within the EU (Bürgin, 2020).

This policy management role is necessarily constrained by the intergovernmental mechanisms within the EU, wherein the EU—and by extension, the EC—can only operate in areas where it has been delegated powers by its Members (Murdoch, 2015), a reality that makes the EU much weaker as a meta-organization than would be expected from a national-level entity. As Kerwer (2013, p. 45) noted, "the Commission shelves many rule-making projects because of resistance of the Member States in the [European] Council," the body comprised of the heads of state or government of the member states. Moreover, in practice, the EU's 27 member states are themselves constrained by additional sub-layers such as regional governments and federal entities, meaning that delegation can only take place in the presence of shared system-level goals (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012; Valente & Oliver, 2018). These system-level goals need not be static, however, and they have shifted through the various administrative permutations of the Commission (from the administration of Franco-German production of steel and coal to the construction of a common market and eventually to the creation of the Schengen area, with free movement of capital and labor across borders).

With each of these incremental system-level goals, the EU has functioned as a coordinating agent allowing for "mutual adaptation among its members" (Kerwer, 2013, p. 47), creating a vehicle for achieving these goals independent of the short-term vicissitudes of the member states (Bor, 2014). Moreover, where powers have been delegated, the EC can wield considerable influence, especially in trade policy, the environment, and external diplomatic actions (Kerwer, 2013). Specializing in "regulatory, rather than in distributive or redistributive, policies" (Eberlein & Grande, 2005, p. 89), the Commission thus has the power to influence or even constrain its

[2]Thanks to an anonymous reviewer who suggested this analogy.

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member states as it pursues goals on behalf of the meta-organization, even in areas that might be thought of as exclusively reserved to member states (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2011).

The role of meta-organization collective action in crisis management

This discussion of the EU, and our theoretical framework of meta-organizations shown in Figure 1, combine to explain meta-organizational decision-making, specifically in situations where speed is of the essence. To address this issue and context, we revisit the key features of meta-organizations and then analyze elements that may motivate the EU to participate in crisis management, obstacles that may make collaboration difficult, and evidence of collaborative success.

Frączkiewicz-Wronka and Szymaniec (2012) argue that public organizations tend to perform their tasks more effectively through effective identification, application, and building of valuable, scarce, and unlimited resources. To mobilize actors and influence policy, meta-organizations attempt to replicate normal (i.e., individual member) organizations through the creation of internal policies and procedures, including, critically, setting the rules for decision-making. These processes have been explored in other works (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018; Bor, 2014; Grothe-Hammer, 2016), linked to collective actions taken by the meta-organization and based on whether the decisions within the meta-organization run upward (to the association) or downward (to the member organizations) (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012; Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015; Berkowitz & Bor, 2018). However, it is not in our interest to revisit the entire debate on decision-making in meta-organizations but rather to build on it and focus on a particular setting in which such processes operate, namely, that of a crisis.

As noted in Figure 1 and hinted at above, meta-organizations have attributes that can be useful in mobilizing collective action in a crisis. We postulate that the degree of success of a meta-organization in mobilizing collective action during a crisis depends on the level of influence of the features outlined in Figure 1. A key feature in the framework is the level of centralization and cohesion that exists within a meta-organization. As noted earlier, there is a need for some organizational centralization within a meta-organization that can focus member attention and highlight shared system-level goals, creating cohesion among organizational members. Additionally, as most meta-organizations rely on voluntary association rather than coercion,[3] members may be more likely to act in concert should a crisis arise, especially when this crisis threatens shared goals (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018). Even when a crisis may be farther afield from a shared goal, a strong collective identity and/or similarities among members may catalyze rapid problem-solving (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2005; Cropper & Bor, 2018). Finally, task specialization is a key feature of meta-organizations. They can maximize economies of scale through task specialization beyond what members may mobilize (Zyzak & Jacobsen, 2020) or by lowering the unit cost of needed materials (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008), which may also contribute to the resolution of a crisis more quickly than in the absence of a meta-organization.

On the other hand, the symbolic inherent nature highlighted in the framework of a meta-organization may also make collective action more difficult during a crisis, especially in an acute crisis where flexibility, autonomy, and speed are required. Key symbolic characteristics including legitimacy, status, and reputation derive from the nature of the meta-organization's structure and environment. To facilitate legitimacy, status, and reputation, meta-organizations design regulatory frameworks that tend to be both highly legitimate and effective, precisely because they have been collectively decided (Berkowitz, Crowder, & Brooks, 2020). According to Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks (2020), although these regulatory frameworks provide regulatory intermediation roles (such as standardization of members' practices, reporting, and accountability mechanisms), they paradoxically create regulatory capture or stalemate in meta-organization decision-making. In a crisis, autonomy in pursuit of perceived safe routes to survival is often more important than other meta-goals, meaning collective action is even more challenging to achieve.

In the first instance, the appearance of a crisis in an area outside of a shared and clearly defined system-level goal and/or outside of a meta-organization's original purpose can paralyze decision-making within the organization. In the same vein, the lack of extensive sanction measures within a meta-organization means that members cannot be forced to care about a specific goal in advance of a crisis, leading to divergent approaches when such a crisis occurs (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman, 2012). At the same time, meta-organizations may be dedicated to pursuing core goals while allowing for adaptation within these goals (Ansell, Boin, & Farjoun, 2015), meaning that acute crisis management tools are simply not available at the meta-organizational level (Trondal, 2021). Given enough time and exposure, such issues may become part of a meta-organization's shared goals, allowing for the development of structures, processes, and documents (Frandsen & Johansen, 2018) to readily handle this new threat. In fact, meta-organizations may be uniquely privileged in being able to respond to emergent (rather than emerging) threats. To return to the presence of longer term challenges, examining the *coopetition* among member organizations,

[3]For the most part, federative states are excluded from this definition, given that their constituent members (federal regions, states, and administrative boundaries) are unable to unilaterally secede or leave such a political meta-organization.

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Berkowitz, Crowder, and Brooks (2020) argue that meta-organizations provide a useful framework for combatting climate change, a point also made by Chaudhury et al. (2016), who underscore how the broad variations of organizational structures in meta-organizations can improve adaptation to climate change. Meta-organizations thus appear useful for combating a slowly unfolding and non-imminent crisis that requires shifts in adaptation.

But where a crisis is acute, a meta-organization may find itself unable to act in a short amount of time. As Berkowitz and Dumez (2016, p.151) note, "as devices to support collective action, [meta-organizations] necessarily proceed through persuasion and consensus, which results in a slow decision-making process. Given the structural importance of members' identity and autonomy, meta-organizations are often plagued with intricate conflicts." Ahrne, Brunsson, and Kerwer (2016, p. 12) note that something as mundane as getting everyone's schedules together may be difficult during a crisis, as it "may be difficult to arrange meetings for member representatives on short notice" (they specifically reference the European debt crisis). In other instances, the paradoxical tension of autonomy and delegation between the meta-organization and its organizational members will sabotage collective action, as the competition over autonomy and collective identity can exacerbate conflict (Karlberg & Jacobsson, 2015). Indeed, according to Gulati, Puranam, and Tushman (2012), such tensions result in members being reluctant to offer practical decision-making competencies and resources for collective action. Even where a system-level goal is shared, the slow consensus-building process may lead to "lowest common denominator" policies that barely clear the shared goal (Malcourant, Vas, & Zintz, 2015). Of course, as Dumez and Renou (2020) note in the context of trade associations, preparation can enable meta-organizational crisis management. But Frandsen and Johansen (2018) assert that such preparation is multi-faceted (involving actors, structures, processes, and documents) and thus cannot be expected across all possible shocks that a meta-organization may face.

The intricacies of transboundary crises provide a further illustration of the obstacles connected with intergovernmental meta-organizational collective action (Boin, 2019; Boin, Rhinard, & Ekengren, 2014; Jordana & Triviño-Salazar, 2020a). Building on Streeck and Schmitter's (1985a) concept of private interest government, Tucker (2008) argues that collective reputation management is crucial for countries forming or joining a meta-organization. Streeck and Schmitter (1985b) also describe it as an attempt to maximize the overlap between the specific interests (*categoric good*) of groups such as nation-states and the broader interests (*collective good*) of society. The result is a policy partnership (Eising, Rasch, & Rozbicka, 2017; Green-Cowles, 2001a, 2001b; Lawton, 1996; Mazey & Richardson, 1993), emerging from Richardson and Jordan's (1979) neo-pluralist model of the policy community. In this conception, policymaking is an obscure process, where traditional boundaries between government and interest groups become blurred, and policies are created and controlled through what is described as a myriad of interconnecting, interpenetrating organizations.

Even for those in the know, the obscure policy process takes time, which facilitates the clash with the slow-moving and consensus-building attributes of intergovernmental meta-organizations. In fact, in the face of a crisis, member states in an international meta-organization may be less concerned with the collective good than the categoric good. For example, Blondin and Boin (2020) identify that the success of crisis management coordination across countries is contingent on home politicization, the level of state de-coupling expected, and the extent of exposure to the crisis. Indeed, it is evident from the literature that when a crisis triggers intense political debate, it becomes more difficult for national leaders to agree on transboundary crisis collaboration (Elgström & Jönsson, 2000, pp. 691–2). Similarly, collective action theories have also argued that the basic desirability of a joint crisis response diminishes if a state can disassociate or de-couple itself from a crisis (see Perrow, 1999).

Empirical evidence supports these theoretical assertions in terms of the responses of EU agencies to various transboundary crises (Jordana & Triviño-Salazar, 2020a; Kuipers & Boin, 2015), including the COVID-19 pandemic (Jordana & Triviño-Salazar, 2020b). Boin, Rhinard, and Ekengren (2014) noted that coordination (negotiating boundaries) and centralization (transcending boundaries) could perform an effective role in mitigating EU transboundary collaboration issues during periods of crisis. However, member states during a crisis have relied more on highly specific national-level priorities. Lundgren et al. (2019) note that most EU conflict stems from disagreements on fiscal transfers, rather than searching for ways to delegate more authority to the EU (although increased centralization of authority to the EU may follow a crisis, see Raudla et al., 2015). Returning to Dumez and Renou's (2020) point on meta-organizations needing to have prepared internally for crisis management at the organizational level, the lack of preparation within the EU specifically for crisis mitigation appears to be a particular failing. Trondal (2021) notes that, although the EU tends to centralize its organization during a crisis, it does not centralize its reform processes, creating what is essentially a new bureaucracy to engage with the same problems.

Political science research on EU crisis decision-making (e.g., Backman & Rhinard, 2018; Saurugger, 2013; Wasserfallen et al., 2019) has identified that the EU is more likely to be passive in the face of a crisis unless "the situation is framed as a grave crisis, a strong leadership of large members emerges advocating a firm response, and pressures of public opinion preclude passivity" (Lintonen, 2004, p. 29). Without these

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imperatives, it is unlikely that the EU can move in a manner that satisfies all its member states, resulting in paralysis and conflict at the meta-organizational level. Finally, given the need to delegate authority to the meta-organization (the EU but in particular to the staff of the EC, the organizational unit managing the meta-organization), events that generate large boundaries of uncertainty around their outcomes may lead to member states withholding such delegation to secure precious autonomy for the future. Put another way, if the outcome of the crisis is uncertain, member states may want flexibility and would prefer not to delegate the powers away, especially if the crisis is short-lived.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This paper seeks to examine the initial policy response of the EU and its member states in a specific crisis (COVID-19) and a specific policy domain (air travel restrictions), which was already under the domain of the meta-organization. To do so, we developed and applied a preliminary meta-organization model, based on the key features of meta-organizations, to determine how meta-organizations generate influence over member state behavior or effectively coordinate inter-state action. The theoretical precepts outlined in Figure 1 regarding meta-organizations are usually tested in a case study setting (e.g., Megali, 2022 or Roux & Lecocq, 2022, among many examples), and this paper is no different. Based on the theory elucidated, we use as our meta-organization the EU, in a specific context, to draw general lessons and to develop theoretical contributions.

META-ORGANIZATIONS UNDER STRESS: EU PERFORMANCE DURING THE PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing economic and social lockdown in 2020 is precisely the type of crisis that Lintonen (2004) could have identified as being a facilitator of collective action. Despite the commonalities in terms of nationwide social policy responses (Moreira et al., 2021), its sudden emergence, uneven spread across Europe (Figure 2), and uncertainty regarding its trajectory and severity precipitated public pressure to act, leading to a patchwork of national initiatives to combat its further propagation (Table 2), and existing infrastructure (in the guise of both European legislation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control) to mobilize resources against the virus.

As outlined in our framework in Figure 1, tangible, specific characteristics remain key characteristics of meta-organizations. Based on extant research, a key tangible, specific characteristic is the resource allocation process in meta-organizations. Lawton et al. (2014) use an RBV to highlight the role of political resources among trade association meta-organizations, and the EU has such resources in abundance: It gains legitimacy through its treaty-based origins and cumulative body of laws and procedures (*acquis communautaire*), effective secretariat

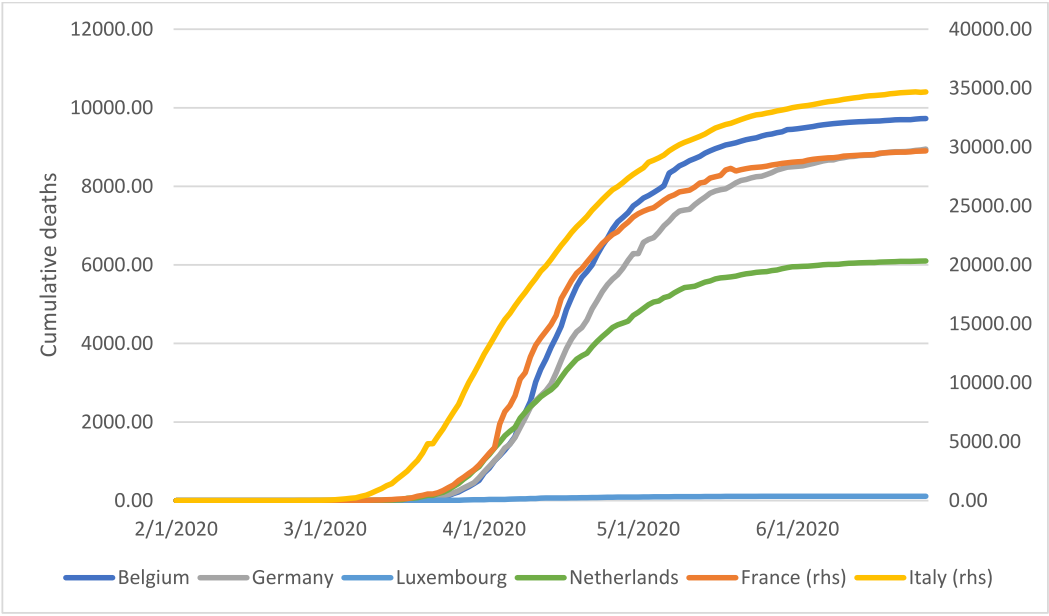


FIGURE 2 **Daily cumulative number of COVID-19 deaths in the original six EU members.** *Source*: John Hopkins University COVID-19 database. The number shown is the absolute cumulative number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 as of that reporting day. France and Italy showed on the right-hand scale.

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TABLE 2 Maximum Oxford Stringency Index value for the original six EU members.

	Max stringency index value	First date	Last date
Belgium	81.48	March 20, 2020	May 4, 2020
France	90.74	March 17, 2020	May 10, 2020
Germany	73.15	March 22, 2020	May 3, 2020
Italy	93.52	April 12, 2020	May 3, 2020
Luxembourg	79.63	March 17, 2020	April 19, 2020
Netherlands	79.63	March 31, 2020	May 10, 2020

Source: Authors' calculations from the Oxford Stringency Index (Hale et al., 2020). The index is numbered from 0 to 100, with higher values indicating much more encompassing lockdowns.

in the form of the Commission; centralization of decision-making, and ability to simultaneously mobilize in different policy domains on behalf of member states. Given this reality, it was logical that the EU would emerge as the key meta-organization to confront what was essentially a cross-national and amorphous threat to its members.

Moreover, also drawing on our framework, meta-organizations have a role in influencing regulation and public policy (Rajwani, Lawton, & Phillips, 2015), either upwards (*externally*) toward policy outcomes and social norms, or downwards (*internally*) toward industry norms and membership behavior. For instance, trade associations establish voluntary standards of behavior for industry members and are important agents for disseminating information to members (Rajwani, Lawton, & Phillips, 2015). An important preposition in the meta-organization literature is actorhood in policymaking, that is, the ability not only to make collective decisions but to be addressable and made accountable as an actor (Grothe-Hammer, 2019). According to Grothe-Hammer (2019), there can be complex and structured inter-organizational spaces that lack actorhood. EU decision-making amplifies this evidence. In the case of the EU, the contestation around actorhood imposes systematic limits on its capabilities, despite the EU being a powerful rule setter for its members. The EU's actorhood is impaired, since it has not attained a monopoly of representation in most areas of activity (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Hill & Smith, 2011) The EU mostly adopts *directives* and best-practice standards rather than resorting to *regulations* in crucial issue areas, such as social policy (Eberlein & Kerwer, 2004). Prior research has linked the EU's impaired actorhood to an inability to act as a global policy actor in most areas of activity on the world stage (Bretherton & Vogler, 2006; Hill & Smith, 2011).

Air travel restrictions during COVID-19

Although there was agreement at the outbreak of the pandemic that *something* needed to be done to restrict the spread of the coronavirus, and the EU acted accordingly in the economic realm (influencing both upward and downward), a coordinated policy on air travel restrictions, which could have made a difference in the early spread of the virus, came about only belatedly. Medical research has shown that if implemented comprehensively and consistently early in a pandemic (Epstein et al., 2007), air travel restrictions can form an effective delaying tactic against the spread of a virus (Ferguson et al., 2006), especially when used in conjunction with other policies. This need for other policies means that air travel restrictions alone are not a silver bullet, as complementary policies such as social distancing (Epstein et al., 2007) or international coordination of antiviral knowledge sharing (Coburn et al., 2009) are required to delay a pandemic's expansion at the outset.

However, as the extant epidemiological literature clarifies, all policies are more effective when rapidly implemented early in a pandemic. But meta-organizing an EU pandemic response took time, owing to issues regarding the task specialization of the EU in such an arena. In fact, in the first instance, the EU had a long lag time in recognizing the severity of the problem, attributable to the EU relying on another meta-organization, the WHO. On January 10, 2020, the WHO noted that travel restrictions for Wuhan specifically and China more generally, were not recommended. This advice was reiterated on January 24. The WTO stated unequivocally on February 29 that, "In general, evidence shows that restricting the movement of people and goods during public health emergencies is ineffective in most situations and may divert resources from other interventions" (World Health Organization, 2020). Given the wholesale adoption by the EC of WHO pandemic plans (Nicoll et al., 2010) in the years preceding the global financial crisis, it is perhaps understandable that the EU would have deferred to the WHO on this particular occasion, even though the EU already had an example of delayed mobilization in a pandemic (the 2009 global swine flu pandemic, where the EU introduced restrictions far too late to be effective, see Bajardi et al., 2011). More importantly, the lack of task specialization perceived by member states for the EU in the pandemic response meant that the response itself was left to other experts, that is, the WHO.

The second issue hindering smooth decision-making for travel restrictions in the EU was the spatial

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differences in the virus's effect, which removed any sense of cohesion across countries and called into question the need for centralization at the EU level. With Italy and then Spain hard-hit first by transmission but comparatively lower rates of incidence in northern Europe, there was less of a constituency for broad-based restrictions, which went against the spirit of the Schengen Agreement's borderless travel within the EU. This situation reduced the EU itself to a coordinating body of national responses, rather than an agent of influence upward (in the policy) or downward (in changing behavior). This situation was also similar to the swine flu pandemic, where member states concurred that the travel response was given over to country-level initiatives (with the EU somewhat uncoordinated), with the only agreement that "it was never an issue in the EU to close borders" (Health Protection Agency, 2010, p. 45).[4]

The result was a missed opportunity to slow the spread of the virus, as early travel restrictions (to and from Italy in late January or early February 2020) could have proven effective in facilitating a delay in the entry, spread, and peak of the disease across Europe, allowing time for national health systems to mobilize and share resources (Chong & Zee, 2012). Russell et al. (2021) note that the benefits of early travel restrictions in the EU during COVID can be traced to the data, as greater than 10% of the case incidence early in the pandemic was imported (their model shows that dramatic restrictions on air travel in Europe would have been required to stop the import of cases by May 2020). Thus, in an open area such as the Schengen Zone, with free movement of people, a coordinated response would have been more effective in reducing the spread of the disease than the approach that was ultimately taken. Oliu-Barton and Pradelski (2021) note that the EC did not issue a call for harmonization on travel restrictions until September 2021, well after such restrictions would have made a difference (Russell et al., 2021).

Ironically, as Woll (2006) notes, the EU as a meta-organization did have the ability to institute such restrictions, as it had already taken the lead in creating a shared system-level goal for open skies air travel within the EU, resulting in the completion of the single market for air transport services in the mid-1990s (Lawton, 1999). In this sense, the EC had already done its homework on the basic infrastructure needed for collective action on air travel and the EU had already been granted authority in an area of collective interest. Nevertheless, this previous agreement did not extend to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the intra-EU debate on implementing some form of air travel restrictions was tinged with political and nationalist controversy from the beginning. In particular, member state ruling elites had been staunchly against such restrictions before the full extent of the virus had been realized, unwilling to countenance an action that went against the original goal of the meta-organization (and where authority had been delegated)—that is, to restrict movement across borders rather than to facilitate it.

Additional factors were at play, as air travel lockdown would have entailed massive financial losses to flag carrier airlines and hence to national budgets via the corresponding reduced corporate taxation. IATA estimated in March 2020 that the loss in global passenger revenue due to COVID-19 would be between US$63 billion and US$113 billion (the actual amount for 2020 was a loss of US$372 billion, according to data from the International Civil Aviation Organization). An earlier lockdown may have entailed more up-front costs but possibly fewer costs down the line but, given the pandemic's uncertainty, member states were not eager to forego a source of revenue during a crisis (as revenues were already threatened by the pandemic, see Țibulcă, 2022). To ease the pain for airlines, EU transport ministers pushed for allowing airlines to replace refunds for cancellations with vouchers at the end of April, a suspension of EU regulations that mandated full refunds (Miocic, 2020). It is difficult to say that the potential fiscal impact of air travel restrictions (as noted by Lundgren et al., 2019, in the context of other intra-EU disputes) did not play a role in initial resistance. This can be seen in the fact that much of the early reduction in passenger traffic that occurred was voluntary and (lack of) demand-driven rather than due to collective action (Figure 3), while the aid packages that went to airlines were largest in countries which had the most dependence on long-haul revenues (Abate, Christidis, & Purwanto, 2020). Ironically, IATA (2021) notes that the effect due to the EU's lack of a coordinated response may have been worse for airlines than an early lockdown, as "shifting rules and confused application of EC recommendations" worked against beneficial public health interventions (such as the rollout of vaccines).

At the same time, the EU was already playing catch-up with the U.S., as President Donald Trump had unilaterally imposed travel restrictions on China in February 2020, followed by restrictions on Iran and Italy in late February, and then the EU on March 12. Due to the abrupt and uncoordinated nature of the U.S. response to the EU, it was plausible that the EU did not want to be seen as following Trump's lead.[5] At the same time, existing EU legislation—the so-called 80/20 rule, which required carriers to use their airport slots 80% of the time if they were to be retained—kept flights with fewer and fewer passengers in the air, actually forcing airlines to fly so as not to lose positions at Frankfurt or Amsterdam airports (although both the U.K. Government and Airports Council International called on the EU to relax this legislation as early as March 3).

[4]The "go-it-alone" attitude did not end at air travel, as on March 4, 2020, Germany prohibited the export of personal protective equipment (PPE), including to other EU countries, with France following shortly after (in direct contravention of lessons learned since the previous pandemic).

[5]Unlike within the EU, there had been far less of a drop in flights to, from, and within the United States in March 2020, as by March 31, 50% of all regular flights were still in operation (Suzumura et al., 2020). Thus, the travel ban might have been a targeted way to protect the United States from specific COVID-19 clusters.

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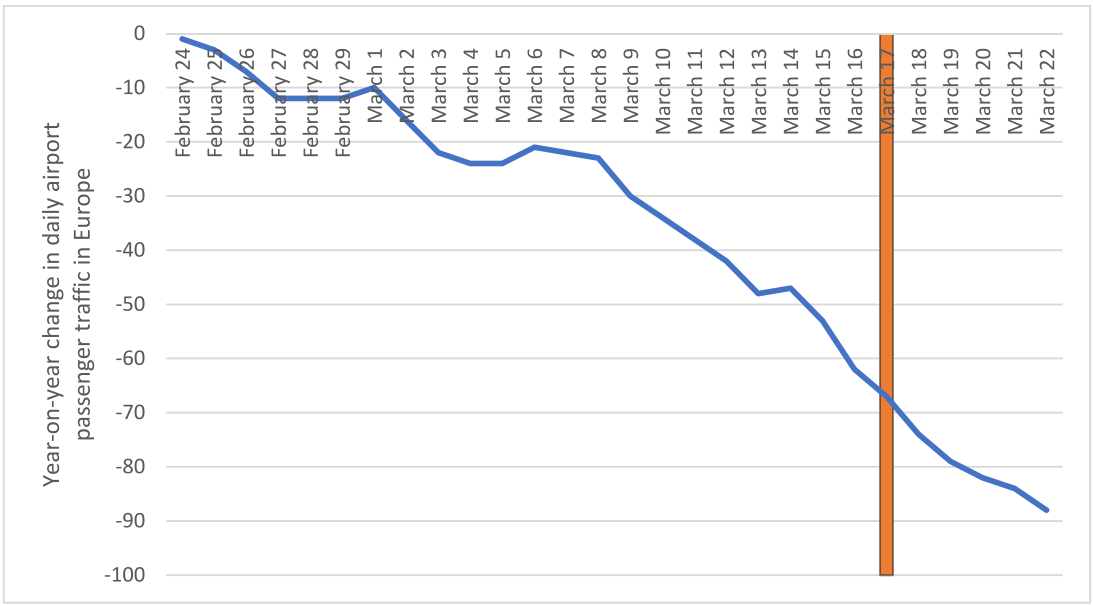


FIGURE 3 Year-on-year change in daily airport passenger traffic in Europe, February 24 to March 22, 2020. *Source*: Data provided by Airports Council International—Europe (ACI EUROPE), https://www.aci-europe.org/airport-traffic-covid-19. The solid line is the day that EU-wide border restrictions were set to go into effect.

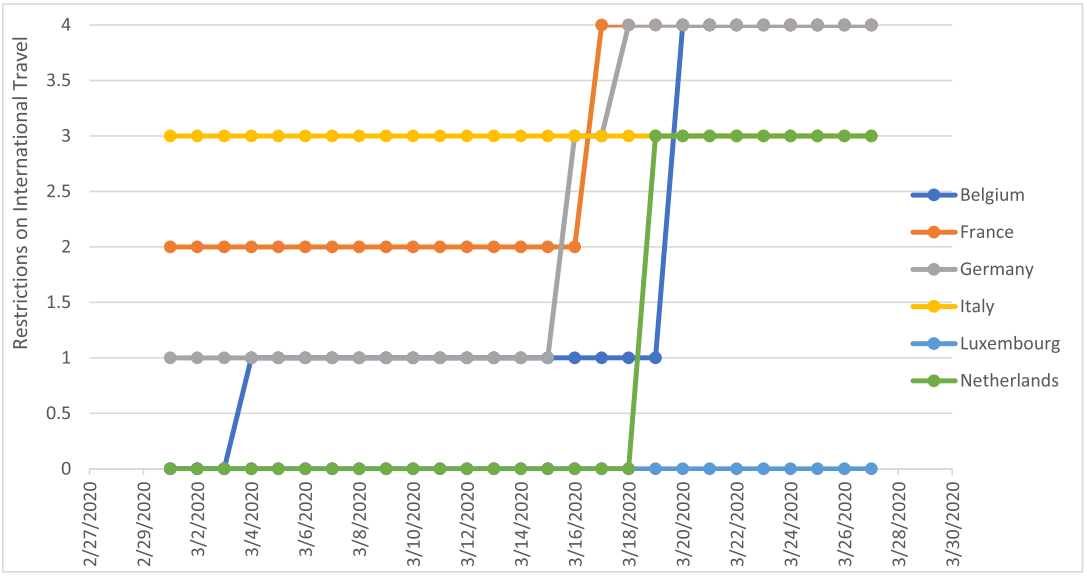


FIGURE 4 Restrictions on incoming international travel in the EU-6, March 2020. *Source*: Oxford Stringency Index (Hale et al., 2020), category C8, restrictions on international travel. The index is coded from 0 to 4, with 0, no restrictions; 1, screening arrivals; 2, quarantine arrivals from some or all regions; 3, ban arrivals from some regions; and 4, ban on all regions or total border closure.

The lack of coordination with the EU on air travel restrictions can be seen in Figure 4, showing just the six founding members of the Union. Prior to the March 17 decision, the EU member states had been taking matters into their own hands with a myriad of responses and restrictions related to their borders, with Italy, not surprisingly, showing the most stringent measures, and Germany, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg substantially lower (and France in-between). It was not until March 20 that all countries, except the Netherlands and Luxembourg, had reached the highest level of restrictions, with Belgium ratcheting up its stringency almost overnight. By that point, the coronavirus was indeed entrenched throughout the EU, with Italy seeing 20,683 COVID-19-related deaths the week that the air travel restrictions went into effect, Belgium seeing its death rate climb for 3 weeks after the ban, and Germany seeing a peak of over 20,000 fatalities 2 weeks after the ban was

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instituted (based on Eurostat data). Although there was some upward influence of the EU in eventually getting a travel ban instituted, the EU had virtually no downward sway in changing member states' behavior toward air travel until it was agreed upon at the meta-organization level (and even then, differences persisted).

Perhaps entirely in character, the official EU-wide travel ban ended on June 15 for EU residents. However, different EU countries had already begun opening their airways in the 2 weeks preceding, with Greece, Germany, Poland, and Hungary leading the way. By July 1, 2020, relaxations against third nation travelers had also begun in the EU, but quarantine recommendations and targeted restrictions against specific countries (including the United States) remained in place, and countries such as Hungary reversed their stance, whereas Finland retained severe and significant restrictions on travel (see Table A1 in the Appendix for a complete picture of the patchwork of directives). Additionally, policy uncertainty endured well into the second wave of the pandemic. For example, on July 21, 2020, the Government of Ireland issued a so-called Green List of 15 (European only) countries with lower virus reproduction rates that travelers could fly to without the need to self-isolate for 14 days on their return. However, in a parallel statement, the Government affirmed: "The safest thing to do is not travel. The pandemic is not over, and the public health advice remains the same." Consequently, businesses and other travelers remained unclear about the validity of travel insurance coverage for trips to anywhere outside of Ireland, whether on the approved green list or otherwise. Similarly, on February 14, 2021, Germany partially closed its borders with the Czech Republic and Austria's Tyrol due to the surge in coronavirus mutations, drawing a swift rebuke from the EU. In this area, as with the entire air travel policy, the EU as a meta-organization revealed a lack of downward influence, playing catch-up to its member states' intent rather than setting the agenda.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our intent in this paper was to highlight a less understood weakness in the practice of meta-organizations: the efficacy of meta-organizations in a crisis. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as a specific example and drawing on the EU's reality as a meta-organization, we have shown the difficulties for meta-organizations—built on shared system goals—to transcend these goals in the face of new and urgent threats. We find that the lack of coordination with the EU on air travel restrictions exposed the inadequacies of meta-organizations where members are sovereign nations in proactively coordinating cross-border responses. Considering this evidence, our work offers several implications for theorists and practitioners while opening new avenues for research.

Implications for theory

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global travel industry was sudden and calamitous. Meta-organizations such as the WHO and IATA were at the forefront of the response, co-developing information resources to assist airlines and air transport professionals and lobbying governments for aviation industry financial relief. However, IATA is a meta-organization built around a shared system-level goal related to international air travel and transport, containing a strong secretariat and organizational identity (necessary to protect its members, see Roux & Lecocq, 2022), and the specific threat of COVID-19 to its members was both apparent and imminent. For other meta-organizations, especially those concerned with different system-level goals, collective action was more difficult, especially in a supranational meta-organization such as the EU. Indeed, the inability of EU member states to coalesce around a single policy on air travel within the framework of the EU and in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis appears to go against extant theories of supranational collective action: Travel restrictions were a policy which, to be effective, should have been undertaken quickly. So, absent any immediate move from the EU, dispassionate, rational actors focusing on cost–benefit analysis should have been more restrictive rather than less (and brought along the remainder of the EU). At the same time, EU leaders had been through several crises in the past decade and appeared to have the adaptive capabilities at the meta-organizational level (including within the staff of the meta-organization, i.e., the EC) to handle what was essentially a public health crisis (apparent to any politician as an area within their purview). Because of this experience, the Commission might have pushed for travel restrictions to have been on the agenda for the member states early in the pandemic. For example, Germany's lead in responding to the virus across several fronts could have facilitated collective action, in line with sociological theories that "especially interested and resourceful members" can push for collective policies in heterogeneous organizations (Oliver & Marwell, 1988, p. 5). Finally, a constructivist view focusing on the social norms or informal institutional processes surrounding the EU response would also note that there had been increasing networks of health organizations across Europe in the preceding 20 years, with these networks activated in times of previous crises (Vollaard, van de Bovenkamp, & Vrangbæk, 2013). Therefore, it might be expected that collective action could be easier due to these pre-existing channels.

Thus, the shortcoming of current theories on collective action in supranational meta-organizations creates an opening for understanding the EU response. We argue that the EU (non-)policy on travel restrictions can be more accurately understood by assessing its traits as a

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meta-organization and the tensions inherent in its identity as an organization of organizations (Dumez & Renou, 2020). As already noted, the functioning of meta-organizations coalesces around shared system-level goals but under a specific organizational umbrella that acts as the agent of members. Although an informal hierarchy may exist in a supranational meta-organization due to the differing capabilities of member nations, the use of the meta-organization itself (in this case, the EU) requires both a shared vision and consensus. Indeed, collective action is inherently linked to the attributes of the meta-organization and its internal organizational capabilities, forcing action at a speed that must sidestep friction and with methods that encapsulate consultation and compromise. In a crisis, the consensus-based mechanisms of a supranational meta-organization can be ineffective unless they have been designed with a specific crisis in mind, that is, that consensus has already been achieved and preparation made. Although we speak here of air travel restrictions, the EU acted more like a battleship across the many faces of the coronavirus, requiring a long time to reverse or maneuver toward the desired course.[6]

The EU's diffuse response to the COVID-19 pandemic specifically in air travel restrictions highlights an additional issue: Not only are crises difficult to manage for a meta-organization, but they are also nearly impossible if the required action goes directly against the shared system-level goal that the meta-organization was supposed to protect and especially where no preparation was done for such an eventuality. As Laviolette et al. (2022, p. 45) note, a meta-organization can "balance the internal identity claims of its organizational members through alignment and differentiation [and] … build an externally coherent identity by assembling and positioning legitimacy among institutional actors." Examining the evolution of the EU, the Schengen Area of free movement was a crowning achievement of the common market and a goal that a large majority of EU members were committed to defending. By contrast, fighting the coronavirus pandemic via restrictions on air travel would have meant going back precisely on that shared system goal, actually deconstructing the externally coherent identity (commitment to free movement), without a plan to balance the internal alignment of the member states. Such a *volte face* regarding the shared goal of the EU was a bridge too far for some countries (at least in the short term). With a meta-organization containing a bureaucracy oriented toward people's free movement—even though it had already been tested during the 2015 refugee crisis—it was difficult to suddenly reorient the EU into collective action that was diametrically opposed to the point of cohesion.

[6]The standard business metaphor of "turning an aircraft carrier" fails us here, as modern aircraft carriers, by dint of their engineering, can make a 180° turn in as little as a minute (albeit with substantial tilt).

Implications for practice

A lesson from the EU's response to COVID-19 is that a meta-organization should focus on a limited, tangible, and specific collective policy with its members during a crisis, stressing the amplified benefits within the framework of the meta-organization, as opposed to a go-it-alone situation. For example, suppose in the cacophony of the COVID-19 crisis, the EU had swiftly focused on air travel restrictions as the first step in a multi-faceted approach. In that case, it might have been able to append this specific policy to the broader goals aspired to by the meta-organization, namely, protecting the health of its citizens.

The rapidly evolving nature of pandemics like COVID-19 makes it challenging to offer additional recommendations for practitioners. But if we recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic was a *white swan* event (Taleb, 2007)—one that could have been foreseen but not precisely predicted—then we can plan for similar crises (Hartwell & Devinney, 2021). Put another way, although the exact dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic were unforeseen, private, public, and nonprofit organizations—and meta-organizations—are aware that there are risks that exist that cannot be precisely predicted but can be quantified. This is, in fact, the basis of catastrophic risk insurance, which assigns probabilities to events that are unlikely and unknown.

Perhaps the key lesson for meta-organizations is the recognition that these events may occur in the future. The meta-organizational staff must be prepared for contingencies to inform their members. In the EU, this would have meant the Commission building its own in-house capabilities based on prior experience and international best practices as the organization of organizations. It is a truism that public administration is the art of dealing with the probable and not the possible (in a world of scarce resources, not every eventuality can be provided for). But the EC had a wealth of information from previous experience in understanding the administrative, substantive, or procedural means to react. In this sense, *coping with a crisis* should become a shared system-level goal, with buy-in before a crisis occurs. The EC can play a key role in facilitating the emergence of this system-level objective.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Although crisis management is well-explored in the management and organization literature (Barron & Vanyushyn, 2021; Bundy et al., 2017; Pearson & Clair, 1998), understanding the crisis management constraints and behaviors of meta-organizations can add to this research, especially in understanding the obstacles to collective action. More work needs to be done to understand the drivers of collective action within specific meta-

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organizations, especially those that are concurrently supranational, by drawing on the extensive political science literature on crisis decision-making (for example, Oneal, 1988; Wasserfallen et al., 2019). At the same time, exploring on a case study basis the inner workings of various organizations comprising a meta-organization could also help to scale up the responses made by a meta-organization such as the EU.

Indeed, along these lines, more work needs to be done to explore international organizations as meta-organizations and to catalog where their shared system-level goals are and how they work at achieving these. Also, as shown in this paper, it is important to note when meta-organizations go beyond shared system-level goals and the consequent ramifications for the meta-organization. It is only once researchers have built up this catalog of what functions a meta-organization might reasonably be expected to perform—as either outlined by the institutions of the meta-organization, its founding documents, or the member organizations—can we have a sense of, first, how they perform according to these metrics and, second, where the boundaries are for effective functioning.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are, in many ways, related to the avenues for future exploration just mentioned. Our examination of the EU's air travel policy under COVID-19 focused mainly on a qualitative examination rather than a formal quantitative model. At the same time, we deliberately avoided the "inside the parliament" case study approach usually utilized in political science to make the broader case of meta-organizational hysteresis. But to see the impediments to a meta-organization's functioning, we may need precisely this: The leadership case studies prevalent in political science to understand what happened in decision-making and collective action. But such data are challenging and require either the passage of time (as documents become declassified) or excellent positioning and sources within the halls of power. Thus, much of the observation of meta-organizations comes from the outside and focuses on whether they act collectively.

Similarly, we may have a potential bias in forcing a normative judgment *ex-post* regarding the (un)desirability of collective action in our study of meta-organizations. In this paper, we have referenced the extant epidemiological and virological literature on the possible desirability of early action to shut down air travel, but this is at best conjecture (especially given the still cloudy provenance of COVID-19). If shutting down air travel could be a wholly ineffective way of stopping a vector of transmission, the entire discussion here would be irrelevant. Thus, we must attempt to avoid after-the-fact bias when confronting the reality of meta-organizations operating in an environment of limited information. At the same time, we should make recourse to first principles and especially Kantian a priori knowledge when examining collective action, which should have been attempted and could have been known to be effective even in an atmosphere of limited information. The temptation to impose normative judgments must be avoided in favor of exploring the process rather than the outcome.

CONCLUSION

The problems of managing meta-organizations have been noted in the literature, but it is only recently that the idea of international organizations, and especially supranational organizations with nation-states as members, have been seriously examined in the meta-organizational sense. This paper has endeavored to advance the meta-organization literature by pairing it with another stream of management research, namely obstacles to collective action, in providing a holistic approach to the specific issue of supranational meta-organizations. Our examination of the EU's actions on air travel restrictions during the initial stages of the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated that supranational meta-organizations have an additional challenge not yet recognized in the management literature: dealing with a crisis.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are shared when contacting the corresponding author.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Travel restrictions in the EU as of July 29, 2020.

Country	Borders open since	Quarantine	Non-EU citizens	UK arrivals
Austria	June 14, 2020	Yes, 14 days	No	No
Belgium	June 15, 2020	Yes, from outside the EU	No	Yes
Bulgaria	June 15, 2020	14 days for arrivals from Portugal, Sweden, and the United Kingdom	No	Yes
Croatia	June 11, 2020 (limited), July 1, 2020 (all EU)	14 days unless producing a negative test result	Only for reason of urgency	Yes
Cyprus	June 9, 2020	Self-isolation until test results produced	Only from Australia, South Korea, Lebanon, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Norway, Switzerland, Israel, and Lichtenstein	No (anticipated August 1)
Czech Republic	June 15, 2020 (limited), July 1, 2020 (more extensive)	Dependent on country classification by ministry (red, orange, and green)	No	Yes
Denmark	June 27, 2020	Advised if arriving from a high-incidence country or region	Only Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uruguay	Yes
Estonia	June 1, 2020	If the infection rate is above 16 in the home country, self-isolation is required; third-country students arriving with no symptoms also must quarantine for 14 days	Residents of Algeria, Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uruguay show no symptoms.	Yes
Finland	June 15, 2020 (very limited), July 13, 2020 (some EU), July 20, 2020 (reinstatement of some controls)	Yes, for emergency arrivals from prohibited countries	From July 27, no restrictions between Finland and South Korea, Georgia, Japan, China, Rwanda, Thailand, Tunisia, Uruguay, and New Zealand	No
France	June 15, 2020	Yes, 14 days for UK arrivals	Testing at the airport required for nationals from South Africa, Algeria, Bahrain, Brazil, United Arab Emirates, the United States, India, Israel, Kuwait, Madagascar, Oman, Panama, Peru, Qatar, Serbia, and Turkey	Yes
Germany	June 15, 2020	Yes, for arrivals from risk areas (50 infections per 100,000, published daily)	Yes, from Australia, Georgia, Canada, Montenegro, New Zealand, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uruguay	Yes
Greece	July 1, 2020 (albeit with requirements for negative test results)	Yes, 14 days if found positive on random testing	Variable, based on current EU Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) guidelines	Yes
Hungary	June 9, 2020; some controls re-imposed July 13, 2020	Mandatory for most EU arrivals; 14 days on suspicion of a virus but with a negative test	Large number of countries still off-limits or on a watch list	Yes
Ireland	July 1, 2020	Mandatory 14 days unless arriving from "green zone" countries	Yes, but the green list is limited to Malta, Finland, Norway, Italy, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Cyprus, Slovakia, Greece, Greenland, Monaco, San Marino, and Gibraltar	Yes
Italy	June 3, 2020	No	No	Yes
Latvia	June 10, 2020	If the infection rate is above 16 per 100,000 cases in the home country, self-isolation is required.	No	Yes
Lithuania	June 1, 2020	If the infection rate is above 16 per 100,000 cases in the home country, self-isolation is required.	No (exceptional cases excluded but with a 14-day mandatory quarantine)	Yes
Luxembourg	June 15, 2020	No	No	Yes
Malta		No, unless exceptional circumstances		Yes

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TABLE A1 (Continued)

Country	Borders open since	Quarantine	Non-EU citizens	UK arrivals
	July 1, 2020 (limited opening to specific EU countries)		A select list of countries are exempt, similar to Cyprus.	
Netherlands	June 15, 2020 (EU), July 1, 2020 (approved countries)	Arriving from high-risk countries, quarantine is advised	Allowed from Algeria, Australia, Canada, Georgia, Japan, Montenegro, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, Serbia, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uruguay	Yes
Poland	June 16, 2020 (air travel), July 1, 2020 (approved countries)	Possible for entry from non-EU countries on approved list	Allowed from Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Montenegro, Georgia, Japan, Canada, Albania, South Korea, and Ukraine	Yes
Portugal	June 15, 2020 (air travel), July 1, 2020 (essential non-EU travel)	No	Essential reasons only and with proof of negative test—changing list of allowed countries	Yes
Romania	June 22, 2020	Yes, but EU citizens exempt	No	No
Slovakia	June 15, 2020 (most EU), June 20, 2020 (Poland, Montenegro, Monaco, Faroe Islands), July 22, 2020 (select countries)	High-risk countries have mandatory 2-week isolation	Allowed from Australia, Canada, China, Iceland, New Zealand, and South Korea	Yes
Slovenia	May 15, 2020, but re-imposition on June 12, 2020, and lessening since July 1, 2020	High-risk countries have mandatory 2-week isolation	Restricted to updated lists on ministry website, requirements of negative test results	Yes
Spain	June 21, 2020 (EU), July 1, 2020 (Portugal)	Erratically enforced	No	Yes
Sweden	July 2, 2020	No	"Non-essential" travel is not allowed, but residents of Algeria, Australia, Georgia, Japan, Canada, Morocco, New Zealand, Rwanda, South Korea, Thailand, Tunisia, and Uruguay may enter.	Yes

Sources: POLITICO.eu (https://www.politico.eu/article/coronavirus-travel-europe-country-by-country-travel-restrictions-explained-summer-2020/), European Commission (https://ec.europa.eu/transport/coronavirus-response_en), and Kayak Travel (https://www.kayak.co.uk/travel-restrictions); websites of various ministries of EU member states.

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