



Standardising the Future: Analysing China's Regulatory Ambitions and the EU's Actorness in Internet Governance

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the actorness of the EU in internet governance (IG) along with the re-politicisation of technological standards, primarily triggered by China's economic rise. Beijing wants to leverage the economic power it has gained in the standardisation process as part of its quest for global leadership in key technologies. Through several industrial strategies, China aims to leapfrog Western states by setting domestically advantageous standards for future technologies on the international level. The far-reaching Chinese proposal for a New Internet Protocol (New IP), which would fundamentally alter the internet's infrastructure, exemplifies China's ambitions, making it an ideal precedent for scientific investigation. Therefore, this thesis addresses the following research question: to what extent is the EU an actor in internet governance allowing it to engage with China on its 'New-IP' proposal?

By linking the EU's actorness in IG – an under-investigated subject in the academic literature – with this very topical case study, it is argued that a high degree of EU actorness in the IG area of standardisation allows Brussels to engage more with China on its New IP proposal. Following this argument, the degree of actorness is a key factor for enabling and constraining the EU's action vis-à-vis China.

This analysis presents several findings that require a nuanced answer to the research question. The investigation identifies a strong opportunity for the EU to take action, along with a very solid presence of the Union in standardisation processes in IG. The EU's capability, however, is less developed given its lack of technological power in the digital sphere. Therefore, the quality of the EU's actorness is analysed by additionally differentiating between the EU as a regulatory and technological actor. While the EU is still able to leverage and develop its regulatory actorness, its declining technological actorness appears to be its Achilles' heel, despite encouraging EU initiatives to reverse this tendency.

The New IP case study reflects this in a nutshell. Given that the Chinese proposal runs fundamentally counter to the interests and values of the EU, Brussels took action on the uni-, bi- and multilateral level. Based on expert interviews, it is shown that the EU was able to counter the Chinese proposal by leveraging its regulatory actorness – especially due to its presence, coherence, international coalition-building and regulatory expertise. However, its lack in technological actorness comes equally to the fore as the EU does not possess the technological savvy to issue similar wide-ranging proposals. The New IP may be seen as a harbinger to a more challenging standardisation environment. As this could undermine the EU's actorness, the thesis concludes with policy recommendations and an academic outlook.