

Frans Timmermans' views on the integration process highlight the relevance of Europe's 'new intergovernmentalism'

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A number of authors have debated whether European integration is becoming characterised by a form of 'new intergovernmentalism', with increasing numbers of decisions made through intergovernmental forms of decision-making such as those in the European Council. In response to criticism of the approach, [Christopher Bickerton](#) writes that new intergovernmentalism can shed light on current issues at the European level, such as the UK's attempts to negotiate EU reform. He argues that recent statements by Frans Timmermans, the First Vice-President of the European Commission, illustrate the relevance of the approach, notably the principle that supranational institutions do not always want 'more Europe'.



In a [recent blog post](#) on EUROPP, Frank Schimmelfenning questions the merits of the [new intergovernmentalism](#) as a new theory of EU integration. Rather than just re-hash the debate we've been having with Schimmelfenning (which can be found in the *Journal of Common Market Studies* [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) it makes more sense to point to the relevance of the new intergovernmentalism for understanding what is going on in the EU today.

Frans Timmermans' new intergovernmentalist epiphany

One illustrative example helps make our case. Last week, Frans Timmermans gave a carefully timed interview to the *Financial Times* in Brussels (the interview is available [here](#) with comments added). Timmermans is Vice-President of the European Commission and the person most likely to directly negotiate with the UK over its EU reform demands. A Dutch Labour party MP, Timmermans was closely involved in arguing for a 'Yes' vote in the referendum on the Constitutional Treaty in 2005. Losing that vote was clearly a formative moment for Timmermans and it was the occasion for what we might call his 'new intergovernmentalist' epiphany.

The FT interview quotes Timmermans as saying that after the 2005 vote he realised that whilst he was still committed to the 'European project', he no longer believed it could take the form anticipated by Jean Monnet and the founding fathers. In the words of his [2013 FT op-ed](#), "Monnet's Europe needs reform to fit the 21st century". Timmermans' words are telling and worth quoting in full:



Frans Timmermans, Credit: euranet_plus (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

If 'ever closer union' is explained as increasing statehood at the European level at the expense of statehood at the national level, that's come and gone... But if 'ever closer union' is meant as European citizens, 500 million of them, understanding that their destinies are linked because of globalisation, because of common threats... then it very much still stands today

These words are significant for a number of reasons, all of which chime with the main claims of the new intergovernmentalism. The first is that Timmermans is clearly indicating that he thinks supranational integration of the traditional kind – lasting transfers of sovereignty away from nation-states to supranational institutions and formalised in any ever-expanding body of European law – is no longer relevant today. In his view, it is neither desirable nor popular.

The second point is that Timmermans is not implying that this means an end to integration itself, just that integration is no longer synonymous with supranationalism. What Timmermans has in mind is a form of integration pursued by member states who alone have the ability and authority to give direction to the EU and to set the limits of integration. In the words of his FT op-ed, “The member states must restore the political balance in the EU, help it regain its focus and make the EU work for Europeans again”.

The third point is that Timmermans is not a national politician attacking the EU and seeking to strengthen governments at the expense of Brussels. Timmermans is a passionate European occupying one of the most powerful jobs at the heart of the EU’s leading supranational bureaucracy, the European Commission.

As the new intergovernmentalism has suggested, supranational institutions do not always want “more Europe”. And integration can no longer be conflated with supranationalism, as it has so often been done by scholars of the EU. We need a new theory to help us understand this kind of integration and the new intergovernmentalism is an attempt at providing it.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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