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Anarbay Rajapov*

PhD in History

Kazakh Academy of Sports and Tourism

050022, 85 Abay Ave, Almaty, Kazakhstan

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7893-0119>

The legitimacy of international organisations in public discourse

Abstract. This study aimed to identify the key factors influencing the legitimacy of international organisations within public discourse. The methodological framework was based on an interdisciplinary approach that integrates political science, organisational theory, and media studies. This enables an examination of legitimacy through the analysis of normative and legal documents, official reports, open information platforms, and media discourse. The findings indicated that compliance with international law, transparency in governance processes, effectiveness in achieving stated objectives, and adherence to normative standards are crucial elements shaping support for international organisations from member states, the international community, and the public. In particular, successful peacekeeping initiatives, epidemic control programmes, and environmental projects contribute to strengthening organisational reputation. In contrast, failures in crisis response, inadequate accountability, or disproportionate influence by certain donors may undermine trust. The study also revealed that the media and the public play a pivotal role in shaping the image of international organisations. Negative narratives that highlight bureaucratic obstacles, conflicts of interest, or delays in decision-making often exert a stronger influence on public perception than positive reports of success. In this context, effective communication strategies are particularly important, especially those aimed at enhancing transparency, responding promptly to criticism, and engaging with civil society. The findings provided a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying the formation of legitimacy for international organisations within the current global governance framework. They contributed to the further development of theoretical concepts related to trust in supranational institutions, the dynamics of organisational reputation, and the role of communication in maintaining or undermining legitimacy. This research offers new perspectives for future analysis of the interconnections between normative rationality, political legitimisation, and public expectations – perspectives which may serve as a foundation for further scholarly exploration in the field of global governance

Keywords: legal validity; institutional accountability; global governance; public opinion; communication strategies

Introduction

International organisations (IOs) serve as key actors in global governance, performing a range of functions that include maintaining peace, promoting economic development, and addressing global challenges such as climate change, epidemic control, poverty reduction, and the promotion of social equity. Their influence extends across a wide array of areas – from humanitarian aid to international trade – making IOs indispensable participants in global processes. However, despite their significance, the legitimacy of these organisations remains a topic of ongoing debate. In the 21st century – marked by deepening economic inequality, intensifying global competition among states, and escalating cultural conflicts – trust in IOs has become a vulnerable element of their functioning.

As noted by L. Dellmuth *et al.* (2022), the legitimacy of IOs is defined as the extent to which elites and citizens

consider their authority to be appropriate and justified. It is shaped by both social and individual factors that determine the level of trust in these organisations across different segments of society. The issue of IO legitimacy is inherently multidimensional, as it depends on numerous interrelated factors. On one hand, institutional elements – such as transparency, fairness, and accountability – play a central role in building trust in these organisations (Steffek, 2023). Citizens and political elites expect international organisations to uphold democratic standards, not merely to demonstrate effectiveness in fulfilling their mandates. At the same time, the ability of IOs to adapt to emerging challenges and respond to global crises is also a crucial factor in maintaining their legitimacy (Schmidtke & Lenz, 2024).

In addition to institutional factors, the knowledge produced by international organisations and their

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*Corresponding author



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contributions to the scientific grounding of policy decisions exert a significant influence on their legitimacy. As noted by M. Zapp (2021), research conducted by organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the World Bank serves as a key instrument for strengthening their legitimacy. Studies undertaken by IOs in areas such as climate change, global health, and inequality provide an evidence base that supports informed decision-making. Nevertheless, despite this contribution, many aspects of IO legitimacy remain underexplored. In particular, the role of civil society, the media, and other non-governmental actors in shaping the discourse around the legitimacy of international organisations requires further, in-depth analysis.

The issue of IO legitimacy has been actively explored across various academic disciplines. M.J. Debre & H. Dijkstra (2021) observed that international organisations with more developed bureaucratic structures exhibit greater resilience to external challenges, owing to superior adaptability and institutional capacity compared with those that possess less advanced administrative systems. T.A. Bekele (2021) examined the concept of “scientific multilateralism”, which suggests that incorporating scientific knowledge and expert assessments helps to build trust in international organisations, particularly by enhancing the credibility of their decisions. Particular attention has been devoted to analysing the criteria by which researchers, policymakers, and experts assess the legitimacy and effectiveness of international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the African Union (AU), the European Union (EU), and the BRICS grouping (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). D. Panke *et al.* (2022) examined the factors that influence perceptions of legitimacy in international organisations and concluded that legitimacy tends to be stronger when organisations have a regional rather than global scope, and when non-state actors are granted access to decision-making processes between international organisations. The research by L. Gelot & F. Söderbaum (2024) showed that the AU actively employs legitimisation strategies such as expanding peacekeeping initiatives, strengthening cooperation with international partners, and promoting norms of democratic governance. At the same time, however, the organisation faces both external criticism and internal tensions among its member states. For the AU, the ideals of Pan-Africanism and regional solidarity are of particular significance, although these are frequently tested by diverging national interests. Members of international organisations themselves also shape the sources of their legitimacy. In the case of BRICS, as noted by E. Moch (2024), key factors include economic cooperation and shared interests among member states.

The media, politicians, and the public influence perceptions of international organisations through public debates, information campaigns, and even the spread of disinformation. In the cases of the EU, AU, and BRICS, media representation significantly affects public perception. Researcher O. Dumdum (2023) observed that negative coverage – particularly criticism of effectiveness

or transparency – tends to resonate more strongly with the public than positive news. This is because negative messages amplify public distrust, stimulate debate, and are more likely to be widely disseminated in the media landscape.

As the legitimacy of international organisations in public discourse remains an under-researched topic, this study aimed to identify the key factors that determine the legitimacy of such organisations and to analyse existing conceptual approaches to its understanding. Particular attention was given to theoretical perspectives on how legitimacy is formed, especially in relation to the identification of core factors and their connection to organisational effectiveness. Special focus was placed on legitimacy concepts grounded in democratic procedures, institutional performance, and engagement with non-state actors.

Materials and Methods

To achieve the aims of this study, a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach was employed, combining political science, organisational theory, and media studies. This approach made it possible to explore the legitimacy of international organisations through multiple analytical lenses, addressing both the normative foundations of their functioning and public perceptions of their activities within the global information space. The source base for the study comprised normative and legal frameworks, official documents of international organisations, analytical reports, and open-access information platforms. This ensured a broad and balanced examination of the issue of international organisations’ legitimacy in public discourse. The analysis of normative and legal documents focused on the foundational instruments that define the operations and guiding principles of international organisations. In particular, attention was given to the Charter of the United Nations (1945), the Constitution of the World Health Organization (1948), and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000). This review enabled the identification of formal criteria for legitimacy, structural features, and normative mechanisms of accountability.

The analytical base also included reports from international organisations – such as the World Bank (2024) and the African Union Peace Fund Report (2022) – as well as global trust indices measuring public confidence in international organisations (Pew Research Center, 2024). The analysis of these sources made it possible to assess the evolving perceptions of international organisations among the public, governments, and expert communities, as well as to identify the main challenges affecting their legitimacy in the current political context. Furthermore, the inclusion of reports from international organisations and sociological surveys enabled the identification of key trends in the development of trust in international institutions and highlighted the factors influencing their reputations.

The theoretical framework was based on the concepts of delegated legitimacy, organisational legitimacy theory, and institutional isomorphism. These were applied to assess the effectiveness of international organisations and their role in global governance. The study employed qualitative content analysis to examine the tone of media coverage, key arguments, and shifts in narratives concerning international organisations, depending on the political

context. The analysis covered open information platforms such as the Pan-African Parliament (2025), the European Parliament (2025), and TV BRICS (2025), which made it possible to identify the main strategies of legitimisation and delegitimisation of international organisations in public discourse. In addition, discourse analysis was used to reveal dominant rhetorical constructions employed by political actors and the media in shaping public opinion about international organisations. Particular attention was given to the study of framing – that is, the mechanisms through which the media construct specific images of international organisations.

Results

Conceptualising legitimacy in the context of international organisations. The legitimacy of international organisations is not an inherent or objective attribute, but rather the result of how they are perceived by relevant audiences – namely, member states, international actors, and the public – who assess their desirability, appropriateness, and normative justification within a shared framework of values and standards (Binder & Heupel, 2021). Legitimacy forms the foundation of IOs' functioning, as even the most effective decisions may remain unimplemented without the trust of key stakeholders. It is a crucial tool that enables international organisations to secure stability and support in global processes. Legitimacy is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses legal, procedural, performance-based, and normative dimensions.

The legal legitimacy of international organisations underpins their operations and recognition within the global governance system. It is ensured by compliance with international law, organisational statutes, and other normative and legal instruments that define their mandate and regulate their activities. The Charter of the United Nations (1945) is a foundational document that sets out the rules, principles, and powers of the organisation, including its responsibilities for maintaining peace, international security, and cooperation. Compliance with the provisions of the UN Charter is a fundamental factor in ensuring the organisation's legal legitimacy within the international arena. The Charter grounds the UN's legitimacy in its legal status (Articles 1, 2, 4-6), functional powers (Articles 10-51), accountability mechanisms (Articles 55-76), and provisions for institutional development (Articles 108-109). Together, these elements establish a normative framework that fosters trust among member states, the international community, and the wider public. Within the WHO, the legitimacy of its operations is secured through the principles set out in the Constitution of the World Health Organization (1948). These include Article 1 (defining the organisation's purpose), Article 2 (outlining WHO's core functions), Article 4 (ensuring equality of member states in decisionmaking), Article 18 (detailing the powers of the World Health Assembly), and Article 63 (establishing mechanisms for member state accountability). Collectively, these provisions ensure the organisation's normative, functional, and procedural legitimacy. Such documents serve not only as regulatory instruments but also as symbols of the legal foundations upon which IOs operate, reinforcing their standing within the system of international relations.

Legal legitimacy also depends on international organisations' adherence to the principles of member state sovereignty and the avoidance of overstepping their mandates. The legitimacy of the European Union is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000), particularly through Article 1 (upholding human dignity as the foundation of governance), Article 11 (guaranteeing freedom of expression and access to information), Article 12 (the right to freedom of assembly and association), Article 20 (equality before the law), Article 41 (the right to good administration, including transparency and efficiency), Article 42 (public access to EU documents), and Article 47 (the right to an effective remedy and a fair trial). However, an IO's legal legitimacy may be called into question if its actions exceed the limits of its formally defined powers (Zürn *et al.*, 2021). Such overreach can lead to legal disputes and erode trust in the organisation. For this reason, strict compliance with legal norms is essential for maintaining stability, legitimacy, and the confidence of both member states and the international community.

The legitimacy of international organisations such as BRICS, NATO, and the AU is rooted in both internal effectiveness and external perception (Nuruzzaman, 2022; Lenz & Söderbaum, 2023). Key criteria used to assess legitimacy include institutional capacity, compliance with international law, economic performance, military and political resilience, and the level of support from member states and external actors. In the case of BRICS, the primary source of legitimacy lies in economic cooperation (Lee & Sims, 2024). BRICS offers economic cooperation without political preconditions, making it appealing to states seeking to avoid dependence on the West. At the same time, experts – including R.D. Blackwill & T. Wright (2020) – have pointed out that BRICS faces challenges to its legitimacy due to internal heterogeneity and a lack of clear political coordination. NATO is assessed based on military and political stability, collective security, and adherence to international law (Dzhyhora *et al.*, 2024). Despite criticism over its expansion, the alliance maintains a high level of legitimacy owing to its strict security standards and institutional guarantees. Former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has repeatedly emphasised that the alliance remains a key guarantor of stability for democratic states (Siposné Kecskeméthy & Sipos, 2023). In the case of the African Union, legitimacy primarily stems from regional integration and security. Rwandan President Paul Kagame has highlighted the AU's role in safeguarding the sovereignty of African states (Kgasoane, 2021). The African Union Peace Fund was originally established in 1993 under the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) as a central mechanism for financing peacekeeping operations. Following the OAU's transformation into the African Union in 2002, the fund continued to evolve. By 2021, it had reached a level of financing that significantly strengthened the organisation's economic autonomy (African Union Peace Fund, 2022). BRICS employs a system of rotating chairmanship, which ensures equality among member states. Brazilian diplomat Celso Amorim has emphasised that this rotation prevents any single country from dominating the group (Jobim, 2023). However, the absence of a unified political decision-making mechanism limits the organisation's overall effectiveness. Within the African Union,

legitimacy is supported by the Pan-African Parliament, which promotes political integration across the continent (Pan-African Parliament, 2025).

The output legitimacy of international organisations is based on their ability to effectively achieve their stated goals while ensuring a fair distribution of resources and benefits among participants. It is essential that member states' expectations are aligned with the organisation's actual performance. The World Bank Global Development Report 2024 highlighted the need to increase transparency in decision-making processes and to limit the political influence of individual donor countries on international financial institutions (World Bank, 2024). By positioning itself as a key strategic partner for middle-income countries, the World Bank underscores the importance of its mission to support financial stability and economic development – an essential foundation for its legitimacy in the eyes of governments and the public.

The WHO significantly enhanced its output legitimacy through the successful coordination of global efforts to combat epidemics (Yang, 2021). Notable achievements include the timely dissemination of information, the development of recommendations for national governments, and the coordination of medical resource distribution – all clear demonstrations of the organisation's effectiveness. At the same time, failures or delays in response, such as at the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic, have raised concerns about the WHO's capacity to fulfil its mandate, thereby negatively affecting perceptions of its legitimacy

(Toshkov *et al.*, 2022). In the case of the IMF, output legitimacy largely depends on how its financial assistance programmes are perceived (Reinsberg *et al.*, 2022). The organisation earns trust when its actions help stabilise economies and support states in times of crisis. However, its dependence on major donors – such as the USA and the EU – and their disproportionate influence over decision-making processes has at times raised concerns about the fairness of resource allocation and the IMF's political neutrality (Cliffe *et al.*, 2023). Similar challenges are faced by the AU, which seeks to ensure equal access to resources among its member states. Nonetheless, internal disparities between more economically developed countries – such as Nigeria and South Africa – and less developed states, including Chad, the Central African Republic, and Burundi, complicate efforts to achieve this goal (Aleyomi, 2022). Thus, output legitimacy depends not only on measurable outcomes but also on how these outcomes are perceived by member states and the public. This makes legitimacy a critically important factor in the effective functioning of international organisations.

To better understand discursive approaches to legitimising international organisations, Table 1 illustrates how such organisations draw on different normative domains to justify their legitimacy. The table highlights three key normative domains – liberalism, communitarianism, and technocracy – alongside additional standards such as international influence, external recognition, and structural necessity.

Table 1. Normative standards in the discursive legitimization of international organisations

Ideological orientation of the IO or its key members	Discursive source of legitimacy	Example
Liberalism	Democracy	“The OSCE promotes human rights, the rule of law, anti-trafficking, good governance and democratic processes” (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2005)
	Human rights	
	Rule of law	
	Environmental protection	“The Leaders adopted the Statement on Joint Response to Climate Change as a concrete manifestation of ASEAN's collective commitment to address climate change” (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2010)
Communitarianism	National sovereignty	“The signing and full and harmonious implementation of treaties is an outstanding example of ... the legal equality of states, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of states, and the principle of non-intervention” (Organization of American States, 2000)
	Political community	“The Forum is also united by shared values that guide its entire decisionmaking process and policy implementation” (Pacific Islands Forum, 2018)
	Economic community	“The vision of the Southern African Customs Union (SACU) is to be “an economic community with equitable and sustainable development, dedicated to the welfare of its people for a common future” (Southern African Customs Union, 2012)
Technocracy	Functional capacity	“The protection of individuals against arbitrary measures by the state falls within our expertise” (Council of Europe, 2017)
	Economic well-being	“ASEAN cooperation ... contributes to a better quality of life in the region” (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2006)
	Peace and security	“[Authority] reaffirms its commitment to the peace, security and stability of the ECOWAS region” (Economic Community of West African States, 2017)
Other	International influence	“ASEAN continued to build its external partnerships and secured a prominent role for itself in the evolving strategic architecture of East Asia” (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2006)
	External recognition	“Because of our focus and tangible results, COMESA is gaining support from the international community” (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa, 1998)
	Structural necessity	“Only if states work together is it possible to solve the major problems of today. This is why the Council of Europe was set up in 1949; it is now Europe's largest political organisation” (Council of Europe, 2008)

Notes: OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations; ECOWAS – Economic Community of West African States; COMESA – Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa

Sources: developed by the author

International organisations, within their respective normative domains, appeal to various standards to justify the legitimacy of their activities. The liberal domain emphasises values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and environmental protection – as demonstrated, for instance, by the OSCE’s focus on promoting democratic processes. Communitarianism centres on the principles of national sovereignty and shared values that underpin political and economic communities. The technocratic approach highlights functional capacity, economic well-being, and peacebuilding, reflecting the efforts of IOs to demonstrate competence in addressing specialised tasks. Additional categories such as international influence, external recognition, and structural necessity underscore the broader significance of these organisations. For example, ASEAN emphasises its international partnerships, while the Council of Europe highlights the importance of its role in addressing global challenges.

Scientific knowledge, as a mechanism of legitimisation, does not belong exclusively to any of the traditional models of legitimacy but plays a supportive role in affirming the authority and influence of international organisations. The process of “scientisation” is a strategic tool used to strengthen trust in their activities by drawing on scientific data,

research, and analytical methods (Rautalin *et al.*, 2021). It enables organisations to formulate evidence-based recommendations and decisions, grounded in empirical findings rather than political or financial interests. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, for instance, employs standardised indicators such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) to compare the educational systems of member states, promoting global educational reform through empirically validated approaches (Mahapoonyanont & Songsang, 2024).

Scientific engagement also involves the development, dissemination, and adaptation of knowledge through publications, conferences, research projects, and other channels. It forms the foundation of so-called “soft governance”, whereby scientific reasoning serves as the basis for policy formation and the implementation of global standards (Bekele *et al.*, 2021). In this way, scientific credibility enhances the reputation of international organisations, supports the resolution of global challenges, and fosters institutional trust. Between 2000 and 2024, scholars have assessed the legitimacy of international organisations using a range of criteria. Table 2 presents the key evaluation criteria proposed by various authors, offering deeper insight into the multidimensional nature of this concept.

Table 2. Legitimacy assessment criteria for international organisations according to different authors

Authors	Criterion	Description
T.M. Franck (2006)	Fairness	Procedures and decisions should be just and equitable
	Transparency	Decision-making processes should be clear and comprehensible
	Inclusiveness	Equal participation of all stakeholders
	Effectiveness	Demonstrated practical outcomes that align with stated objectives
M. Zürn (2018)	Democratic legitimacy	Public accountability and inclusive decision-making processes
	Functional legitimacy	Capacity to effectively address specific global issues
L.M. Dellmuth & J. Tallberg (2021)	Normative alignment	Adherence to global norms such as justice and equality
	Result-based legitimacy	Success in achieving organisational goals
	Transparency	Accessibility and openness of organisational information

Source: developed by the author

T.M. Franck (2006) identified key criteria such as fairness, transparency, inclusiveness, and effectiveness. He emphasised the importance of fair and equitable procedures and decisions, clarity in decision-making processes, equal participation of all stakeholders, and the achievement of practical results aligned with stated goals. M. Zürn (2018) focused on democratic legitimacy, which includes public accountability and inclusive decision-making, as well as functional legitimacy, relating to international organisations’ capacity to address global challenges effectively. L.M. Dellmuth & J. Tallberg (2021), in their research, highlighted the significance of normative alignment, performance-based legitimacy, and transparency. They stressed the importance of compliance with global norms such as justice and equality, success in achieving objectives, and the accessibility and openness of information.

In conclusion, the legitimacy of international organisations directly affects their effectiveness and the level of trust they command from member states and the public. It is determined by their compliance with international law, their ability to achieve defined objectives, and adherence to principles of fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness.

Legal foundations, practical outcomes, and alignment with global norms play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of legitimacy. In the current global context, legitimacy remains a critical factor influencing the stability and operational strength of international organisations in the face of political challenges.

The influence of media and the public on the image of international organisations. The media play a fundamental role in shaping public discourse on IOs, as they largely determine public perceptions of these bodies, including their image, level of trust, and perceived legitimacy. In a globalised world, the media function not only as intermediaries between IOs and the public but also as active agents in constructing narratives that influence public opinion about the organisations’ activities. They possess a unique ability to shape both positive and negative images, either reinforcing support for IOs or, conversely, damaging their reputations through the dissemination of critical or even inaccurate content (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2023). At the same time, the public, receiving information through the media, not only develops perceptions of IOs but also becomes an active participant in discourse, reinforcing or undermining trust in these institutions.

Of particular interest are studies showing that negative coverage of IOs has a significantly stronger impact on public opinion than positive reporting. Critical narratives tend to provoke a more intense emotional response within society, due to a general human tendency to focus on negative aspects – especially when they concern the effectiveness or fairness of an organisation's actions (Dellmuth & Tallberg, 2021). In such cases, the media often serve not merely as a source of information but as amplifiers of certain public sentiments, generating widespread resonance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the WHO exemplified how a critical media narrative can undermine trust in an international organisation. Its actions came under intense scrutiny, with accusations of political bias and delays in responding to the global crisis. Although the organisation made considerable efforts to coordinate international measures to combat the pandemic, media coverage often focused on its shortcomings. This emphasis contributed to a distorted perception of its effectiveness in many countries.

A similar media impact was observed in the case of the EU. During the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent migration crisis, the EU became a focal point of media criticism for its perceived bureaucratic nature and lack of swift action in the face of urgent challenges (Caretta, 2021). Politicians such as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán actively utilised the media space to criticise what they viewed as excessive EU interference in member states' domestic affairs (Urbán & Polyák, 2023). Such narratives not only undermined the EU's image as an effective global actor but also exacerbated internal tensions, deepening divisions among member states.

BRICS remains less prominent in Western media; however, within its member countries, the bloc shapes its own media discourse, portraying itself as an alternative centre of global governance. State-controlled media in Russia and China actively promote an image of BRICS as a counterbalance to Western dominance and as a force advancing multipolarity in global affairs (Hooijmaaijers, 2021). At the same time, researchers such as H.V. Pant & T. Scholz (2022) argue that BRICS functions more as a symbolic alliance than as a bloc with tangible influence over global politics. This divergence in narratives illustrates how media in different countries can shape public perception of the same organisation in markedly different ways. Public opinion on BRICS is polarised, as shown in a Pew Research Center (2024) survey. Only 19% of respondents expressed a favourable view of the alliance, while 17% viewed it negatively. The largest share – 24% – took a neutral stance, whereas one-third (32%) reported having never heard of BRICS. This indicates the bloc's relatively low visibility outside political and economic elites, particularly in non-member states. As expected, scepticism towards BRICS is considerably higher in Western countries. In Sweden, for example, 45% of respondents expressed a negative opinion of the alliance – a figure largely attributed to the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war and political debates surrounding Sweden's accession to NATO. High levels of criticism were also recorded in the USA and Spain, where 30% of respondents reported an unfavourable view of BRICS. These data confirm a broader trend in which BRICS is perceived in Western countries not only as an economic grouping but also as a political challenge to the existing

global order. In countries of the Global South, perceptions of BRICS are more mixed. For instance, in Saudi Arabia, 55% of respondents reported having never heard of the alliance, indicating a limited informational presence of BRICS in certain key economic regions. Within BRICS member states, public perception is notably more favourable: 38% of respondents in Russia and 36% in India expressed support for their country's membership in the bloc. Even in Argentina – despite the official withdrawal of its application to join – 32% of citizens held a positive view of BRICS, compared with only 13% expressing a negative opinion. These findings demonstrate that, although BRICS presents itself as an alternative global centre, its influence and level of public support vary considerably by region. While member states actively promote a favourable narrative regarding the alliance's role, low awareness in many countries – including potential future members – remains a significant obstacle to its broader international legitimisation.

Figure 1, presented as a subgroup analysis, illustrates how various communication elites influence public perceptions of international organisations. The graph displays the average impact of positive and negative messages on public opinion regarding organisations such as the UN, IMF, WTO (World Trade Organisation), EU, and NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement). Key stakeholder groups shown include civil society organisations (CSOs), international organisations (IOs), governments, and both their positive and negative assessments.

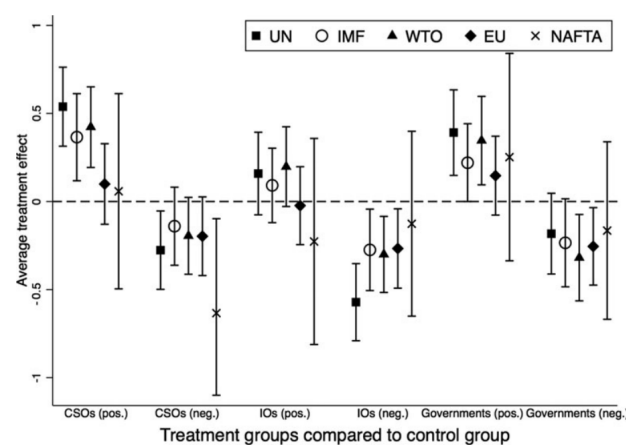


Figure 1. Impact of positive and negative narratives from different stakeholder groups on public perception of international organisations

Source: L.M. Dellmuth & J. Tallberg (2021)

The analysis reveals that positive messages from CSOs and IOs generally have a constructive effect, increasing trust and public support. Positive narratives about the UN and WTO show a notably high average effect, supported by 95% confidence intervals. In contrast, negative messaging, particularly when originating from governments or CSOs, can exert a strongly detrimental influence, significantly undermining the reputation of IOs. Negative commentary on the IMF and NAFTA generates a marked adverse effect, indicating the vulnerability of these institutions to public criticism. The graph also highlights the importance of the information source. Governments, even when conveying

positive messages, do not exert as strong an influence as civil society or international organisations. This suggests that the public tends to place greater trust in independent and nongovernmental actors over formal state authorities. Conversely, negative government statements can have a particularly damaging effect, reinforcing public doubts about the legitimacy of IOs.

Thus, this analysis illustrates that public perception of IOs is a complex and multilayered process, shaped not only by the content of information but also by its source. For communication to be effective, international organisations must actively engage with civil society organisations and the media, fostering positive narratives and responding promptly to criticism. Acknowledging these factors can help international organisations maintain their legitimacy and trust, even in the face of widespread misinformation. The graph highlights the importance of collaboration with various actors in the information space and underscores the need to develop strategies for preserving public confidence.

Fake news poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of international organisations by complicating their engagement with the public and undermining trust in their activities (Chambers, 2021). With the rise of digital media and social platforms, disinformation campaigns can spread rapidly, distorting public understanding of how international organisations operate. This challenge was particularly evident during the Brexit referendum, when the EU became a key target of disinformation efforts. Fake news circulated during this period emphasised alleged excessive EU control over member states' domestic affairs, fuelling anti-European sentiment (Parnell, 2024). These narratives influenced not only the outcome of the referendum but also broader perceptions of the EU as a supranational body. Such disinformation not only damages the reputation of international organisations but also creates significant operational obstacles, forcing them to divert resources toward countering false claims and rebuilding public trust.

Effectively crafted positive narratives can significantly strengthen the legitimacy of international organisations. Information campaigns that highlight achievements and successes serve as vital tools in countering disinformation and negative stereotypes. The WHO's polio eradication programmes gained widespread support due to extensive media coverage of the initiative's successes (González-Silva & Rabinovich, 2021). Continuous communication with the public through media channels helped to showcase tangible outcomes, such as reduced incidence rates in the most affected countries. This approach enables the public to recognise the real impact of an organisation's work, thereby reinforcing trust and support from member states. Moreover, involving partner organisations and local communities in these campaigns enhances their effectiveness, fostering a sense of global solidarity.

Information campaigns organised by international organisations themselves can have a considerable impact on strengthening their legitimacy. The EU launched the initiative *What Europe Does for Me*, aimed at demonstrating the concrete benefits of EU policies on citizens' everyday lives. The project provides access to regional and sector-specific analytical materials that highlight the advantages of EU membership for various social groups and

professions (European Parliament, 2025). The African Union, in turn, conducted a high-profile information campaign focused on its peacekeeping missions in Somalia and the Central African Republic, which helped improve the organisation's perception among populations across the continent (Mohamed, 2023). BRICS has also taken steps to shape its public image, launching the media platform TV BRICS to enhance cooperation between the news agencies of member states and promote its own interpretation of global events (TV BRICS, 2025).

Equally important is the positive media emphasis on the AU's successes in conflict prevention and maintaining stability. Information materials highlighting the AU's peacekeeping efforts not only help shape a favourable image of the organisation but also underscore its capacity to address complex regional challenges effectively (Okorie, 2024). The AU's successful operations in stabilising conflict zones across Africa demonstrate the significance of its role as a mediator in peace negotiations. Such narratives not only enhance trust in the AU among member states and the public but also bolster its international authority. Thus, combating fake news and promoting positive examples of IOs' activities are essential components of their communication strategies aimed at reinforcing legitimacy and public trust. Effective use of media and social platforms enables organisations to highlight real achievements and present themselves as key actors in addressing global and regional challenges.

Social media have fundamentally transformed the mechanisms for shaping narratives about international organisations, opening new avenues for communication while also introducing significant challenges. They have become a powerful tool for IOs to convey their messages directly to a broad audience, bypassing traditional media channels. Official UN and WHO accounts on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram are actively used to share information about initiatives, debunk myths, and shape a positive public image (Pertiwi & Purwanti, 2023). Through these social platforms, IOs can respond to crises promptly, providing timely and accurate information that helps strengthen public trust in their activities. This approach makes organisations more accessible to the public – an especially important factor in the context of global challenges, where the speed and accuracy of communication are crucial.

Civil society plays a key role in shaping narratives about international organisations, acting both as an ally and a critic. Non-profit organisations, research centres, and think tanks – such as Transparency International – ensure a necessary level of transparency and accountability by publishing independent reports on the work of international bodies (Lang, 2021). These studies help the public to better understand the role and relevance of such organisations, contributing to the reinforcement of public trust. Such initiatives also bolster the position of IOs by highlighting their effectiveness and alignment with stated goals.

Social media have significantly transformed the dynamics of interaction between IOs, civil society, and the general public. On the one hand, they open up new opportunities for communication, allowing organisations to respond swiftly to crises, disseminate reliable information, and showcase their achievements. On the other hand, social media platforms have also become arenas

for the spread of fake news and manipulation, which can seriously undermine trust in international organisations. During conflicts or economic crises, disinformation may be used to discredit the efforts of these organisations, distorting public perceptions of their activities. In such circumstances, international organisations are compelled to adapt their communication strategies, engage actively on digital platforms, and establish clear and transparent mechanisms for accountability.

An important aspect of strengthening legitimacy lies in partnerships between IOs and civil society. Independent think tanks, research institutions, and non-governmental organisations play a dual role: on the one hand, they assess the performance of IOs by providing impartial information on their strengths and weaknesses; on the other, they help disseminate positive narratives by highlighting successful initiatives. For instance, organisations focusing on environmental or humanitarian issues often receive significant support due to independent studies demonstrating their effectiveness. The media remain a key tool in shaping public opinion about international organisations. They serve as an intermediary through which the public learns about the achievements or shortcomings of these bodies. Successful information campaigns, grounded in real outcomes, can not only enhance trust in an organisation but also attract new partners and resources. Environmental projects supported by the UN or regional bodies often reach a broader audience due to active media coverage.

Thus, the legitimacy of international organisations is a multidimensional phenomenon that requires a comprehensive approach. It can be ensured only through an effective combination of transparency, innovative communication strategies, engagement with civil society, and sustained efforts to build public trust. In a global environment where information spreads instantaneously, international organisations must prioritise openness, accountability, and the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders in order to remain influential and legitimate actors in global governance.

Discussion

The research has shown that the legitimacy of international organisations (IOs) is a dynamic socio-political construct shaped by legal, normative, and procedural factors, and significantly influenced by the perceptions of key actors – member states, international stakeholders, and the general public. Given that IOs operate in a complex international landscape, their legitimacy is not a static attribute but evolves in response to a variety of factors, including political contexts, international agreements, and shifts in public opinion.

The main findings of the study indicate that IO legitimacy is a multifaceted concept encompassing several key dimensions: legal, procedural, performance-based, and normative. Legal legitimacy is defined by the organisation's adherence to international law, founding treaties, and procedural regulations. Procedural legitimacy relates to the mechanisms of decision-making, their transparency, and inclusiveness. Performance-based legitimacy reflects the organisation's ability to effectively fulfil its mandate and achieve its objectives. The normative dimension is associated with moral and ethical standards that shape trust in the organisation's actions and contribute to its broad recognition.

Certain scholars, including M. Zapp (2021) and T.A. Bekele (2021), have argued that the production of scientific knowledge by international organisations is an important source of their legitimacy. This capacity enables organisations to justify their decisions, maintain dialogue with member states and the public, and foster trust in their activities. However, in this study, such an approach is not treated as an independent criterion of legitimacy, as the generation of knowledge alone does not guarantee adherence to the principles of transparency, accountability, and democratic decision-making. The scientific knowledge produced by international organisations is a valuable tool for substantiating their decisions and reinforcing their positions in global discourse. Nevertheless, its influence on perceptions of legitimacy is not always direct, as member states and the public may assess organisational activity through the lens of political or economic interests. Accordingly, this study considered the legitimacy of international organisations through institutional, procedural, and normative dimensions, which directly determine the level of trust in their operations and the extent of their influence within the international system.

The legitimacy of international organisations directly affects the degree of public and member state trust, as well as their capacity to implement political and economic initiatives effectively. This research has highlighted the crucial relationship between legitimacy and the stability of the international order – an essential component of global governance. In modern context, international organisations serve not only as regulators but also as arbiters in addressing global conflicts and challenges. Furthermore, in analysing the legitimacy of international organisations within the framework of public discourse, it has been observed that political rhetoric, media narratives, and public opinion play a significant role in shaping perceptions of the legitimacy of their actions. Media can enhance public trust in these organisations by highlighting their achievements, but they can also contribute to the emergence of critical attitudes, particularly in cases of inefficiency or a lack of transparency. The importance of this issue is underscored by the fact that international organisations are key actors in global politics, bearing responsibility for tackling major global issues – from climate change to international security. They engage actively with states, civil society, and the private sector, forming complex decision-making mechanisms that require a high level of trust from all stakeholders. Therefore, examining their legitimacy not only provides deeper insight into how these organisations operate but also informs recommendations for improvement. Enhancing decision-making procedures, increasing transparency, developing effective communication strategies, and fostering active engagement with the public are essential for strengthening the legitimacy of international organisations in modern globalised world.

The study confirmed that the legal legitimacy of international organisations is not merely a formal criterion of compliance with international law but also a crucial factor in fostering trust in their activities. Adherence to statutory norms constitutes a fundamental condition for the validity of their decisions. However, as the analysis shows, legal legitimacy is not static; it evolves in response to changes in the international political context. In

particular, its stability can be affected by conflicts of interest among member states, which may lead to crises of trust in international organisations. The research revealed a notable correlation between legal legitimacy and mechanisms of international justice. Institutional structures endowed with judicial or quasi-judicial functions play a significant role in determining the level of legitimacy attributed to international organisations. This is supported by data indicating a relationship between an organisation's legal status and the degree of its acceptance within the international arena. Therefore, legal legitimacy is defined not only by formal compliance with legal standards but also by the extent of recognition it receives from member states and the broader international community.

The output legitimacy of international organisations is largely determined by their ability to achieve stated goals and respond effectively to global challenges. The study demonstrated that public trust in international organisations correlates with their capacity to implement declared programmes and initiatives. At the same time, it was found that the effectiveness of such IOs depends on their adaptability to shifting international conditions and their ability to overcome bureaucratic obstacles. The findings of the study highlight the importance of strategic resource management and transparency in decision-making as key components in strengthening output legitimacy. In this regard, it was observed that international organisations demonstrating high levels of effectiveness typically possess clearly defined accountability mechanisms, which, in turn, contribute to greater public recognition. Conversely, low performance may prompt increased criticism and raise doubts about the necessity of certain organisations.

The analysis also showed that the evaluation of output legitimacy is a multi-layered process. The assessment of an international organisation's effectiveness varies depending on the interests of key stakeholders. While for member states the main criterion is the implementation of political and economic strategies, the public tends to focus more on the social and humanitarian aspects of IO activities. This divergence presents additional challenges, as international organisations must balance competing expectations, which can complicate decision-making and affect how their legitimacy is perceived. The results of this study broadly align with international academic literature on the legitimacy of IOs. Researcher S. Besson (2022) noted that the democratic deficit of international organisations remains one of the primary threats to their legitimacy – a conclusion supported by this study, particularly in the case of supranational bodies such as the UN. The study by C.P. Efunniyi *et al.* (2024) also emphasised the importance of transparency and accountability in building public trust in IOs. The present findings reaffirm this conclusion, as decision-making mechanisms and the degree of inclusivity in these processes significantly influence public perceptions of legitimacy.

The recognition of IOs as legitimate and effective actors in global affairs depends on their ability to demonstrate compliance with international law, achieve stated objectives, and ensure transparency in governance processes. These conclusions align with the research of B. Reinsberg & O. Westerwinter (2021), who emphasised the critical importance of trust among key stakeholders for

the stable functioning of IOs. Furthermore, the analysis by P. Bargaúes & P. Morillas (2021) indicates that the adaptability of international organisations to changing global conditions is one of the key factors influencing their legitimacy. Thus, the legitimacy of international organisations is not a static attribute but requires continuous refinement of governance approaches – an idea supported by the findings of this study.

At the same time, not all aspects of this research fully align with previous scholarship. For instance, the study by B. Clift & T.A. Robles (2021) stresses that economic organisations such as the IMF gain legitimacy primarily through the effectiveness of their financial assistance programmes. However, this study has shown that the public often views such programmes with ambivalence, as they are frequently accompanied by stringent economic conditions, which can undermine trust in the organisation. In conclusion, this study confirmed that the legitimacy of IOs is a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by a combination of effectiveness, transparency, normative compliance, and engagement with key stakeholders. It not only reinforces existing findings but also offers new perspectives for analysing the interaction between IOs and their global audience.

Conclusions

This study aimed to analyse the issue of the legitimacy of international organisations within public discourse, focusing on the multidimensional nature of this concept and its role in global governance. The findings revealed that the legitimacy of international organisations is grounded in several key aspects: legal compliance, procedural transparency, effectiveness in achieving stated goals, and adherence to normative standards. The primary factors underpinning support for IOs are their ability to meet the expectations of member states, the international community, and the general public. In the face of contemporary global challenges, legitimacy plays a crucial role in ensuring the stability, trust, and operational capacity of international organisations.

The legal legitimacy of international organisations is confirmed by their adherence to international law and their formally established mandates. For instance, the operations of the UN are based on its Charter, which provides the foundation for the organisation's functions and outlines its role in promoting peace, security, and cooperation among states. However, issues relating to member state sovereignty and potential overreach beyond organisational mandates remain ongoing challenges that may affect public trust in these institutions. Key determinants of legal legitimacy include the coherence of legal norms, procedural transparency, and conformity with international law – all of which shape perceptions of organisations as lawful actors in global governance.

Performance-based legitimacy represents another critically important aspect of the functioning of international organisations. It is sustained by the ability of these organisations to effectively achieve their mandated goals and carry out tasks aligned with the interests of member states and the international community. For instance, the WHO's success in combating epidemics strengthens its result-based legitimacy, while delays in crisis response – such as during the COVID-19 pandemic – highlight

vulnerabilities in this dimension. Similar challenges face the IMF, whose legitimacy largely depends on the effectiveness of its financial stabilisation programmes and the level of trust in its resource allocation procedures.

The study also found that transparency and accountability in governance processes are essential for the perception of legitimacy. In modern information environment, where the media and the public play a central role in shaping views of organisational activity, negative media narratives often have a greater impact than positive ones. This underlines the need for international organisations to engage proactively in communication and reputation management. The use of social media platforms, such as the official pages of the UN or the WHO, allows the timely dissemination of information, the debunking of misinformation, and the reinforcement of public trust.

However, the study also revealed certain inconsistencies in assessing the relative importance of different aspects of legitimacy. Public trust may be maintained even in the face of setbacks, provided that an organisation demonstrates stability and consistency in upholding ethical principles. Some researchers have noted that

increased transparency can pose risks, as exposing internal processes may reveal managerial shortcomings, potentially undermining trust. Taking these factors into account is important for future research into the conditions under which each element of legitimacy plays a decisive role.

Future studies should focus on examining the impact of social and cultural differences on perceptions of legitimacy, as well as analysing the role of digital technologies in shaping global discourse. In particular, further research could concentrate on comparative analyses of various international organisations across different regions, exploring how political, economic, and social factors influence their legitimacy.

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Conflict of Interest

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