

Fatal remedies. How dealing with policy conflict can backfire in a context of trust-erosion

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Abstract

This article investigates the relation between policy conflict and trust erosion. We find that in a trust-erosion context, practices to deal with conflict may backfire and lead to further conflict escalation. The article draws on an in-depth analysis of 32 narrative interviews in a conflict over a contested multibillion- euro highway project in Antwerp (Belgium). Actors all attribute conflict escalation to a failure of “obtaining public support,” but they tell three different stories of how public support was lost. Based on these stories, policymakers resorted to two practices to obtain support, which we term “branding” and “bargaining.” We find that these practices were unsuccessful because they did not take trust-erosion into account, thereby contributing to more trust-erosion and further conflict escalation. Practices intended to end conflict proved to be fatal remedies

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is organized conflict. The opposition of views on policy and society is essential in a polis. To organize conflict and to allot power, representative democracies hold elections. Yet, the signals that voters give in the polling booth are notoriously difficult to interpret. Fortunately, democracy is not limited to the electoral process. Rich democracies also allow for policy conflicts on concrete policy programs and projects (Hajer, 2003; Keane, 2009; Mouffe, 2009). To deal with conflicts, policymakers draw on policy repertoires (Jabko, 2019). A policy repertoire contains ideas and practices that policymakers are familiar with, but due to contextual variation in specific policy cases, the repertoire will be performed differently (Della Porta, 2013; Jabko,

2019; McAdam et al., 2001; Tilly, 1978). Repertoires in policy have similar characteristics as repertoires in the performing arts (Della Porta, 2013; Jabko, 2019). Many orchestras can play Beethoven’s 5th symphony, but every performance will differ depending on the dynamics between the players, the director, the venue, and the audience.

Policy conflicts are ubiquitous in modern democracies but remain undertheorized in theories of the policy process. Recently, we have witnessed renewed academic interest in the dynamics underlying policy conflict (de) escalation (Verloo, 2015; Weible Heikkila, 2017; Wolf Van Dooren, 2018a). Although we know that trust plays an essential role in conflicts and their prolongation (Forester, 2009; Susskind et al., 2000; Wu Laws, 2003), trust-erosion dynamics in policy conflicts remain conceptualized, nor theorized. Both Verloo (2015, p. 184) and

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Wolf Van Dooren (2018a, p. 13), for example, posit the critical role of trust erosion in the development of a conflict. Still, they provide no conceptualization of trust or its dynamics. This article aims to address that lacuna by studying policy-conflicts through the theoretical lens of trust that we borrow from studies on governance in low-trust contexts (Rothstein, 2000, 2013). Because we track the process of trust-erosion by studying a case of policy conflict, this article also adds to the literature on governance in low-trust contexts. Tracking the erosion of trust as a dynamic process contributes to the insights on the feedforward mechanisms, mediated by neutral institutions, that come into play as trust erodes or recovers (Rothstein Teorell, 2008). This article reports on a study of policy conflict and trust erosion in the context of a multibillion-infrastructure project (2005–2014) in the Belgian city of Antwerp.

We first discuss the theoretical mechanism of how policy conflict may lead to trust erosion. Next, we explain the methodology. The analysis of our empirical results indicates that all actors draw on the policy repertoire of “managing public support” to explain the Oosterweel conflict, but that their perspectives of what it means for a policy to have public support differ. We conclude that the practices to deal with policy conflict in Oosterweel were a fatal remedy in the context of trust-erosion (Sieber, 1981). Instead of settling the conflict, they led to more trust-erosion and further conflict escalation.

II. POLICY CONFLICTS, THE EROSION OF TRUST AND POLICY REPERTOIRES

i. Policy conflicts

Public policy conflict, with conflict defined as “the process that arises when two or more persons or groups manifest the belief that they have incompatible objectives” (Kriesberg Dayton, 2017, p. 2), can stall the implementation of even those policies that have been well-prepared and have enjoyed broad support in political-administrative arenas (Matland, 1995).

Such a deadlock is problematic for policymakers convinced of a policies’ worth. In diverse societies with more vocal and higher educated citizens, more people have the ability to participate in policy conflict (Hajer, 2003; Keane, 2009). Therefore, the ability to cope constructively with conflict is vital for sound and effective policymaking.

Conflict, however, has remained a background concept in most theories of the policy process. This has impeded our understanding of how policy conflicts work (Lan, 1997) and has prompted renewed attention in conceptualizing and theorizing public policy conflicts (Verloo, 2015; Weible Heikkila, 2017; Wolf Van Dooren, 2018a). Recent studies have provided insights on the properties that characterize policy conflicts and the theoretical dynamics underlying conflict escalation. But they have not yet turned the analytical gaze to policy conflict settlement and, more particularly, the role of trust in making conflict manageable, even if they acknowledge the vital role played by trust erosion in the development of conflict (i.e., Verloo, 2015, p. 184; Wolf Van Dooren, 2018a, p. 13).

When it comes to the existing knowledge on how to settle policy conflicts, the vital role of trust is also recognized in the conflict mediation literature (Deutsch, 2011, pp. 27–28). But even though the importance of trust for a successful negotiation is widely acknowledged (Wu Laws, 2003), and a lack of trust is used to explain failed conflict settlement (Forester, 2009; Susskind et al., 2000; Kriesberg Dayton, 2017), we lack a theorization of how trust-erosion impacts the process of policy conflict escalation. Kriesberg and Dayton (2017), for example, states that in protracted conflicts, adversaries are “frozen in mistrust” (p. 215). Still, he does not define trust, nor does he present theoretical mechanisms of how trust erodes as conflicts become more protracted. A richer theorization of trust seems necessary if we want to deal effectively with policy conflict (de)escalation.

ii. Trust erosion

Rothstein (2000) defines trust as “a bet on the future contingent action of others” (Rothstein, 2000, p. 286). One way to make that bet is to assess the incentive structure of the “other.” Yet, in the real world, incentive structures are ill-defined and inaccessible. Agents supplement the limited information on incentive structures with what they know about the moral standards, the professional norms, and the other agents’ historical record. Agents hence construct a view of the “other.” In small groups, people can build such a view of the other from personal interaction. In large-n settings, personal contact is not feasible. Yet, also in large-n settings, “others”—for example, policymakers, politicians, citizens—are often trusted. Trust is generalized to all members of a group.

Generalized trust is based on collective memories of the past that are passed down to individuals (Rothstein, 2013). Social trust, then, consists of the expectations of how others will behave, which are in turn based on both direct experience and information passed down to individuals through collective memories. By conceptualizing trust as a bet on others’ future actions, a bet shaped by the imprint left behind from personal experience and collective memories, we can theoretically link trust-erosion to conflict escalation. According to this conceptualization, trust erodes when a stakeholder places a negative bet on other stakeholders’ future action, that is, expects the other to act negatively in the future.

A lack of trust between parties characterizes protracted policy conflicts. Forester (2009, pp. 23–24), writing on urban planning processes, illustrates this with the stories that different parties tell about each other. In many cases, he explains, each party, without being aware of it, is telling the same story: “they” cannot be trusted, while “we” can.

We argue that conflicts escalate when new topics are drawn into the original conflict, the number of objectives that parties believe to be incompatible with each other increases as a result, and trust erodes. Parties can engage

in conflict with each other over “substantive,” “procedural,” and “relational” topics, which we conceptualize as different dimensions of policy conflict, each leading to erosion of trust on these different levels. Trust erosion is not necessarily a negative thing, as it also produces increased scrutiny. However, as conflict escalates and trust erodes on more conflict dimensions, conflicts become harder to settle. Moreover, the erosion of interpersonal trust, in particular, can be seen as destructive because the policy dialogue is halted when parties view each other as personal enemies.

The first dimension of a policy conflict is substantive: actors disagree on “facts of the matter” (Laws Forester, 2007). Examples are clashing views on the benefits or drawbacks of building a new dike (van Eeten, 1999), introducing fracking (Metze, 2017), or restricting immigration (van Ostaijen, 2017). Disagreement on policy choices has benefits. It may lead to more creative (Carnavale, 2006; Coser, 1956; Cuppen, 2012) and more informed decisions, for example, as a result of “joint fact-finding” (Karl et al., 2007). Conflicts also signal democratic engagement (Mouffe, 2009; Schnattschneider, 1960). Yet, attenuated substantive conflict may cause an erosion of trust in policy proposals and may ultimately lead people to question governments’ capacity to deliver.

The second dimension of policy conflict is procedural. Not the what, but the how of policymaking is contested. Procedures establish who can participate how, when, and where. Procedures also establish when and how decisions are made. Fairness and transparency are examples of procedural objectives that many people share even in episodes of substantive conflict (Mcloughlin, 2015; Roelofs, 2019). Procedural justice literature points to the importance of legitimate procedures (Tyler, 2000). People are generally willing to accept policies that go against their interests, as long as they perceive the decision-making procedure to be fair. Conflicts on procedures hence have a function in a polity. The scrutiny of procedures keeps the policymaking system healthy. But in concrete policymaking cases, procedural

conflict can distract from the policy issue at hand.

The third dimension of policy conflict is relational. When a conflict is relational, the conflict between policy actors shifts to the intentions and the traits of other group members. The process of separating “us” from “them” is also called “othering” (Wu Laws, 2003). A byproduct of othering processes is the erosion of relational trust that extends to all group members. The decline of relational trust often develops over time (Glasl, 1982; Kriesberg Dayton, 2017; Pruitt et al., 2003), as conflicts escalate and the other’s perceived uncooperative behavior induces uncooperative behavior of the self (Deutsch, 2011, pp. 23–40). Actors become personally hostile to each other and are increasingly convinced that the other’s personal objectives are incompatible with their own objectives. Relational conflicts harm citizen perceptions of the state (seen as an enemy), but also state perceptions of the citizens (McCloughlin, 2015; Yang, 2006). In relational conflicts, parties focus on defeating the “other” instead of resolving the conflict. Policy dialogue stops, and possibilities for procedural or substantive solutions are cut off. As a result, relational conflicts become dysfunctional.

As conflicts escalate, trust in substance, in procedures, and in the other erodes. The arrow also works the other way around: a context of low substantive trust, for example, provides a more fertile breeding ground for substantive conflict to erupt than one of high substantive trust. Moreover, although conflict escalation is often conceptualized as a “ladder” with different stages (Glasl, 1982), and, as discussed earlier, personal hostilities usually develop over time, the presented dimensions of conflict are not temporarily deterministic in that one necessarily precedes the other. One could very well imagine a situation in which two parties who are unfamiliar with each other and therefore lack interpersonal trust become entangled in a relational conflict (i.e., Wu Laws, 2003) that precedes misunderstanding over substantive issues.

iii. Repertoires for dealing with policy conflict

When policymakers attempt to de-escalate conflict, they are likely to fall back on ideas and practices that they have learned to perform. Jabko (2019) refers to a “repertoire” of ideas and practices that policymakers draw from. A repertoire is a theatrical metaphor that conveys “the idea that participants in public claim-making adapt scripts they have performed, or at least observed, before” (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 138). Following Jabko (2019, p. 495), this article defines a repertoire as “a cluster of discursive practices recognized as pertinent by a circle of actors who perform it in a variety of ways.” The concept of a repertoire helps to explain how policy practices build on stable routines over time but, at the same time, can always change due to improvisation within routines. Jabko (2019) gives an example. In the wake of the Eurozone crisis, the repertoire of “stronger governance” gave rise to both continuing with strict and introducing more relaxed austerity measures because just what “strong governance” meant was underdetermined.

The dimensions of escalation, and their link to trust-erosion, affect the scope for practices to deal with policy conflict (see Table 1). When a policy conflict becomes a conflict at several levels (i.e., substantive, procedural, and relational), it becomes harder to settle. More objectives are perceived to be incompatible and fewer opportunities remain to resolve conflict. Policy dialogue, after all, is hampered when parties refuse to participate in procedures (procedural conflict) (Wolf Van Dooren, 2018b) or refuse to talk to each other (relational conflict) (Wolf, 2019). Different types of conflict thus demand different kinds of practices.

In a substantive conflict, with the erosion of trust in policy substance, de-escalation practices should focus not so much on “the facts of the matter” or on convincing the other party, but instead on establishing or utilizing procedures to support negotiation and on maintaining good relations between contending parties. In a procedural conflict, with the erosion of

trust in policy procedures, de-escalation practices should focus not so much on using those same procedures that lack trust but instead on utilizing and strengthening the existing relationships to continue the dialogue between parties, despite a lack of procedural trust. In a relational conflict, policy practice needs to focus on rebuilding a minimum amount of relational trust between parties so that the parties are willing to (re)enter into a dialogue. Without a minimum amount of trust, the procedural and substantive dimensions of conflict cannot be addressed. Relational trust erosion, after all, hampers the dialogue between parties. It is hard to engage substantively or procedurally with other parties when you do not trust anything the other has to say. In that sense, relational conflict differs from the other dimensions: practice cannot focus on policy substance or policy procedures as long as a minimum amount of trust lacks because that minimum amount of trust is necessary to support policy dialogue. Relational trust is an essential condition.

The empirical section will investigate how policymakers reacted to policy conflict by drawing from specific policy repertoires and will discuss the effects of different practices on the trust between contending parties and the (de)escalation of conflict.

III. METHODS

This article studies the conflict over a multibillion-infrastructure project called the Oosterweelconnection. The Oosterweelconnection is a planned highway in Antwerp that became the subject of heated public debate in 2005 and remains in the planning phase. With the empirical data being gathered in 2015 and 2016, this article studies the process until 2014. Because we examine the development of the conflict over a relatively long period, the case lends itself well for studying how policymakers dealt with policy conflict and how those efforts impacted trust dynamics. Thus, the case holds promise for theoretical and practical learning (Timmermans Tavory, 2012).

The empirical research is based on 32 interviews with key stakeholders. The interviews were conducted between August 2015 and January 2016. The respondents included the political leaders of the regional (Flemish) government and the city of Antwerp (7), civil servants (16), members of action groups (7), an urban planning professional (1), and a public communication professional (1). Respondents were selected based on their involvement in the policy process. The list of respondents was updated throughout the interviews by snowballing. The interviews' average length was 1 h 44 m, with some lasting as long as 3u 10 m and others lasting 50 min. The interviewees were asked to reconstruct the policy-process on a timeline through narrative interviewing, an interview technique particularly suited to minimizing justifications by respondents since narrative interviewing focuses on events rather than opinions, attitudes, or causes (Jovchelovitch Bauer, 2007). The narrative interview was supplemented by a semi-structured interview based on a topic list. One of the topics was "public support" ("draagvlak" in Dutch). "Public support" was a common term in policy documents and in the media-analysis we conducted before the interviews. The term was used both to justify practices, with policymakers claiming that practices contributed to restoring public support, and to criticize those same practices, with action group members claiming the opposite. Since a wide variety of practices seemed to be linked in documents to "public support," we wondered how respondents made sense of that term and the practices belonging to the "managing" of public support. The workflow of the analysis consisted of several steps. We first transcribed the interviews at-verbatim. Next, the interview data was anonymized. Subsequently, we coded the data in the software Nvivo. The coding followed an "abductive" logic (Timmermans Tavory, 2012), in which we moved back and forth between data and theory.

First, the coding focused on how the different respondents made sense of "public support". In the narrative part of the interview,

Table 1: *dimensions of policy conflict, their trust corollary and concomitant scope for practice*

Dimensions of policy conflict	Trust corollary	Scope for practice
Substantive conflict	Erosion of trust in policy proposals	With a decline in substantive trust, practices may draw on procedural and relational trust
Procedural conflict	Erosion of trust in the system	With a decline in procedural trust, practice may draw on relational trust and substantive trust
Relational conflict	Erosion of trust in members of the other group	With a decline in relational trust, practice needs to focus on building a basic amount of relational trust between policy contenders

respondents linked the development of conflict to the “loss” of public support and discussed varied attempts to “restore” public support. In the semi-structured parts of the interview, respondents elaborated on what it meant according to them for a policy to have public support. We constructed different accounts of how public support for Oosterweel was lost in three steps. First, we differentiated between different meanings attached to the notion of “public support” found in the data: one seeing public support as the result of a unified political front defending policy proposals (code: “political support”), one seeing public support as active support from citizens (code: “active societal support”) and one seeing public support as something that can be brokered between opposing parties if all parties are willing to compromise (code: “fair bargaining”). In the second step, we linked these different “types” of public support to specific policy responses. For example, those that equated public support with the presence of a unified political front responded to the perceived loss of public support by more explicitly and intensively communicating about Oosterweel’s benefits. We conceptualized such responses as practices belonging to the policy repertoire of “managing public support.”

The third step consisted of crafting three different accounts of how political support was lost, each based on a specific notion of

what public support entailed and seeing specific practices as appropriate to manage public support.

The next step was to link the public support accounts and the practices concerned with managing public support to trust-erosion. We inferred trust by tracking the narrative reconstructions to see how policymakers or protesters’ various actions had feedforward effects on future interactions. This approach fits with the definition of trust as a bet on the future contingent action of others. For example, some policymakers alleged that leaked information adversely affected their expectation of action group members treating information confidentially. Perceptions of behavior were coded through thematic codes, such as “fraud” (when a party alleged that the other party had behaved fraudulently) or taking a “turn” (when a party alleged that the other party had backtracked on earlier promises). Finally, we studied the relationship between the public support accounts and the most frequently used thematic codes. We observed that practices that made sense from one public support perspective had adverse effects on the trust of those reasoning from another public support perspective. For example, we found that protesters saw policymakers’ efforts to strengthen public support as examples of “fraud.” In contrast, policymakers were motivated to keep focusing on promoting the Oosterweel project because tak-

ing a “turn” was seen as behavior that would harm public trust. Based on these insights, we concluded that the staging of specific practices about the management of public support had feedforward effects on the substantive trust in the Oosterweel project, the procedural trust in the policy-processes, and the relational trust between the different parties in the conflict.

IV. MANAGING PUBLIC SUPPORT: THREE ACCOUNTS OF THE LOSS OF PUBLIC SUPPORT

All respondents attributed the continuation of the conflict over the Oosterweel connection to a loss of public support for that project. Yet, because respondents had different views on what public support entailed, their accounts of how the Oosterweel project failed to mobilize support and what types of practices were seen as appropriate for mobilizing public support differed significantly. This section discusses differences in the meanings attached to the policy repertoire of managing public support.

i. Public support lost because there are no “strong shoulders” to stand on

In 1995, the Flemish road agency made plans for a new highway in Antwerp’s northern part, near the Oosterweel area. The highway was meant to address the mobility problems attributed to deficiencies of the current ring road. With only one highway crossing the Scheldt river, the ring was (and is) a semi-circle. An additional crossing on a full circle was expected to alleviate traffic congestion.

Between 1998 and 2003, the Antwerp province governor held extensive conversations with city politicians, economic actors, and representatives of various civil society organizations. According to the early witnesses among the interviewees, the actors generally backed the project. Public support, interviewees stressed, was an explicit concern at this time. The Flemish

government feared local resistance and refused to finance the Oosterweel project unless Antwerp’s governor could demonstrate sufficient public support on the local level.¹ In 2000, the governor organized a one-day public meeting with over 50 stakeholders. Based on that meeting and the previous talks of the governor, public support was deemed sufficient. With the perceived public support secured, the ruling political parties from the Flemish government (Liberals, Social Democrats, and Greens) signed a political agreement to finance the highway. Between 2003 and 2005, different locations for the highway were studied. In this stage, the main actors involved in the policy-process were BAM employees, the public agency responsible for the Oosterweel project. BAM’s governing board consisted of representatives from the different ruling parties to maintain political support from the Flemish government. The governor of the Antwerp province was asked to sustain communication with the city of Antwerp and other local parties so that they, too, would be kept on board.

In the spring of 2005, the government presented the scale model of the Oosterweel highway to the general public. The proposed infrastructure consisted of a tunnel under the Scheldt River and an overpass over old docks. Public debate started soon after that, with the first critical op-ed’s appearing shortly after the presentation. In the summer of 2005, the action group “Straten-Generaal” entered the arena. Straten-Generaal argued that a highway and an overpass close to the city center would harm urban development. They presented an alternative plan for a highway trajectory further away from the city center.

However, during our interviews, many policymakers stated that public support for the project was maintained well into 2007. They did not see the first criticisms and the start of action groups in 2005 as a threat to public support. Some resistance was only to be expected, interviewees explained, as urban projects are never entirely uncontested. However, as long as the support from the key actors—the “strong shoulders” in one respondent’s words—was

maintained, the project should be good.

The second action group, “Ademloos,” was seen as crucial to the loss of public support. Formed in 2007, Ademloos emphasized fine particles, air quality, and public health and argued that Oosterweel would harm public health. Policymakers explained that Ademloos told a story about the Oosterweel connection that administrators were not able to match. One policymaker from the Flemish government looks back on the original plans as a “*high-quality project, which had to face erosion of public support due to the particularly well-managed communication of the opposing camp [meaning: action group Ademloos].*”

As the above quote illustrates, action groups (illustratively termed “the opposing camp”) were seen as competitors in favor of the mass-audience. Still, respondents stress all of this would not have had to be detrimental for public support. If the elected governments of Flanders and Antwerp (i.e., the “strong shoulders”) had cooperated on a counterstrategy to win back the public’s favor, they argue, chances for success would have been high. However, from 2008 onwards, both the city of Antwerp (led by the mayor) and the Social-Democratic Party in the government coalition (of which the mayor was a member) became outspoken critics of the project. Various respondents argued that public support for the original project never recovered from this political turn. A policymaker explains:

When does a political party lose public support? If they fight amongst themselves. When does a policy lose public support? When people are not on the same page, and doubt spreads internally. If a citizen notices that one politician says: “We have to move forward,” while another says: “We have to turn it over seven more times to take an extra look at it”... (...) Public support is equal to the force with which a policy is defended and also [equal to] its credibility. But if people start tearing at a policy internally, then you will fail, and that is exactly what happened in this case.

If the most important players behind a project are unable to commit and sell a project to a mass-audience, public support is threatened. Interviewees explained that after the mayor of Antwerp and the Social-Democratic party withdrew their support in 2008, public support for the Oosterweel project was lost because it left a lingering imprint of insecurity and infighting.

ii. Public support lost because of a government “forcing through”

The previous account assumed that there was broad public support at the beginning of the policy process. Other interviewees, mostly members from action groups but also some policymakers and experts, claimed that Oosterweel never had much public support, to begin with. Respondents contend that most people in Antwerp had never even heard of the Oosterweel project until 2005. How could you possibly claim public support for a project, they asked during interviews, when most citizens did not even know of its existence until 2005? And even after 2005, policymakers dismissed critical questions as being uninformed. One protester recalls the spring of 2005:

“That was a very strange spring. A group of politicians said: ‘We have been in this procedure for years, [we have to show] decisiveness, it has to move forwards.’ A local [action] group said, ‘is this really a good idea?’ And the public opinion did not really know what was going on.”

Frustrated action groups added their alternative trajectories to be studied in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in 2005. The EIA, however, led to further disappointment. Members of Straten-Generaal felt that their proposal had been mistreated. Only around thirty of hundreds of pages had been dedicated to their alternative. They felt like they would never be taken seriously unless they would become more activist. Together with Ademloos, they took the protest to the streets, prompting a surge in media attention. They also collected

enough signatures to hold a municipal referendum in Antwerp on the Oosterweel project in 2009.

During interviews, respondents critical of Oosterweel stressed how ridiculed they felt by the government communication in the lead-up to the referendum. Policymakers renamed the Oosterweel trajectory the “natural trajectory” because the Oosterweel highway would be a circle, which was supposedly the most natural form for a city ring road. Oosterweel critics saw this as “pure manipulation.” While policymakers explained during their interviews that the renaming was done to emulate the effective kind of communication practiced by Ademloos, this very action further alienated critical citizens. It made them feel like their opinions on Oosterweel were belittled.

On 18 October 2009, the Antwerp public voted down the Oosterweel connection by 59.24%. The referendum was not legally binding. While action group members celebrated their perceived victory, policymakers in favor of Oosterweel stressed the referendum’s advisory nature and questioned the referendum’s legitimacy. They noted that only a minority of municipal residents had voted (i.e. 35%). Policymakers initiated various closed committees to study how to move on. This approach angered action groups. Time and time again, interviewees claimed, citizens asked to be included in the policy process. But each time, their efforts failed. Each time, in the words of one respondent, policymakers refused to “bend.”

After the referendum, Straten-Generaal and Ademloos, together with academic experts and CEOs of the Antwerp harbor, developed an alternative proposal. This unusual partnership presented its alternative solution, termed the “Meccano” trajectory (because, like the Meccano toy, it could be implemented in parts), in February 2010. The Meccano trajectory was dismissed by Flemish politicians. Instead, in March of that same year, the original supporters of the Oosterweel project, described as the “strong shoulders” in the previous account, announced what they called a compromise: they would keep the Oosterweel trajectory but re-

move the contested overpass, which would instead become a tunnel. Although presented as a compromise and as a way out of the conflict, protesters, having had no part in the construction of this compromise, felt further alienated than ever.

While the dismissal of the Meccano trajectory resonated strongly with protesters, it was barely mentioned in the recollection of policymakers, not even by those who were critical of the original Oosterweel project. The different reconstructions reflect the different foci of those in charge of the policy-process (focus: getting all of the partners inline) and those resisting Oosterweel (focus: having their concerns taken seriously).

After the compromise of 2010, the EIA had to be redone, with the Meccano included in the new comparison. But the results of the study in 2014 fueled more discussion on methodology and interpretation. The persistence of the conflict and the inability of policymakers to just go ahead and start Oosterweel’s construction proved, according to many respondents, that the original project, as well as its altered version, lacked public support. One action-group member reflects:

If you would narrow down public support to [having a political] majority... Well, if there is one policy demonstrating that the two are not the same, it is this one. Politicians continuously try to say: “there is public support” because it is in their interest to narrow down public support to the counting of votes from democratically elected. But if it were that easy, then there would not be a public debate. Then the [original Oosterweel project] would have been built a long time ago.

iii. Public support was lost because of a refusal to “compromise.”

The third account of public support loss deals with how supporters and critics of Oosterweel reacted to one another after they found themselves entangled in conflict. This account

was told by interviewees with different backgrounds (policymakers, protesters, and experts). It was mobilized both by those who saw public support lost through a failure of strong shoulders and those who saw public support lost through a refusal to bend. The account states that if the other party had been more open to brokering a compromise, public support for an altered Oosterweel project could have been secured, and the policy impasse, which ultimately persisted until 2017, could have been avoided.

Policymakers pointed to an unwillingness to compromise on the part of Oosterweel critics and interpreted this unwillingness as acts of obstruction. Had protesters been more accommodating during the attempts at bargaining, it would probably have been possible to get to an agreement. One reflects:

The problem with the action groups in Antwerp is that they are unable to compromise. I told them many times: "guys, if you really want to accomplish something, and if you want to lobby with politicians. . . You can accomplish many things. But politicians are only going to make big gestures if you can promise to them that if they make these gestures, you will support them." And then we can compromise.

However, because of their unwillingness to compromise, a perception further reinforced by instances of information leaked to the press, action groups were seen to be untrustworthy. As the conflict grew increasingly protracted, and action groups would still not compromise, some policymakers came to view them as egoistically motivated, obstructing a critical public project so that they would not have to concede any of their demands.

However, members of action groups countered that not they, but the other party, was unwilling to compromise. Action group members stressed that they had always accepted invitations from policymakers to discuss the Oosterweel project. But each time they were invited for talks, they perceived no real in-

tention to open up a dialogue. They mainly perceived what they termed "political games." They feared such games replaced a "rational logic" with a "political logic," which could only come at the expense of the action groups that could yield no formal political power.

Protesters blamed the policymakers' political egos for failed bargaining attempts, alleging that they were egoistically motivated (to improve their political position) rather than motivated to arrive at the best possible project. They alleged that policymakers broke promises made to them in informal talks on several occasions. The dismissal of their Meccano proposal was also reinforcing the action group's fears that policymakers would never compromise and that fair treatment was not to be expected.

V. POLICY PRACTICES AND CONFLICT ESCALATION IN A CONTEXT OF TRUST-EROSION

The previous section discussed three accounts representing very different meanings attached to the same policy repertoire of managing public support. This section, connecting the empirical results to our theoretical concepts, analyzes what those accounts reveal about the policy practices used in the Oosterweel process and their effects on trust and conflict. We argue that the policy practices related to the repertoire of managing public support contributed to further trust-erosion. We identify two types of practices from the data: branding and bargaining. Policymakers' efforts to improve the branding of Oosterweel reinforced the lack of trust that Oosterweel opponents felt towards policy substance and contributed to further procedural trust erosion. Procedural trust erosion, in turn, hampered the possibilities for bargaining between the different parties. With no procedural trust that the parties could draw upon, the negotiations on policy substance were strained. This ultimately led to an escalation of policy conflict rather than its settlement.

i. Branding in a context of trust-erosion: how trust erodes from policy substance and policy procedures

How do the accounts of public support loss relate to trust, defined as a bet on others' future contingent action based on a collective memory of the past? We argue that practices to deal with policy conflict that build on a "strong shoulders" account of public support contributed to the erosion of trust from those who mobilized the "forcing through" account.

In our interviews, policymakers mainly mobilized the "strong shoulders" account. In Oosterweel, according to that account, the loss of public support resulted from a lack of consistent and robust communication. Resistance, policymakers argue, will only gain momentum when citizens sense that policymakers are in doubt. As propagated by respondents, the remedy that follows is to tell a strong and consistent story about Oosterweel's desirability. We term those "branding" practices. Branding-type practices assume that policymakers should close the ranks and consistently communicate when faced with public critique. Oosterweel has to become a trusted brand. However, according to the "forcing through" account held by critics, policymakers' very persistence to force through the Oosterweel project was at the heart of their protest. Therefore, branding contributed to trust erosion.

The notion of trust as a bet on future action based on a collective memory of the past helps understand why branding can produce trust erosion. Branding assumes that recipients of the message trust the story's substantive quality about Oosterweel's worth based on positive memories of the past. However, in a conflict situation, positive memories of governmental messages' substantive quality cannot be presupposed. On the contrary, as evident in the reconstruction of the process by respondents, more intensive branding of Oosterweel was a response to increased substantive critique on the qualities of the Oosterweel project. As a result of growing protest against the supposed harm of Oosterweel, policymakers decided that

they needed to construct a more powerful story to convince the public of Oosterweel's worth. The branding of Oosterweel needed to draw on substantive trust that the project could be successful but was used in a context of trust-erosion, where critiques on the qualities of the Oosterweel project were gnawing at that trust. Without trust in the essential quality of the project, branding could easily be seen as dishonest.

As respondents stressed during the interviews, the project's branding and the presentation of a unified front of policymakers led to the further erosion of trust. The renaming of the Oosterweel trajectory, for example, made them feel ridiculed at a time when they hoped their substantive critique on the project would finally be taken seriously. Instead of being taken seriously, protesters were instead faced with a repetition of arguments that they considered flawed, or, as one respondent illustratively called it, "pure manipulation." The latter left an imprint on them of a policy that was seemingly unable to provide answers to critique, making them further question the project. As policymakers did not open up the policy dialogue on Oosterweel's desirability but instead kept reiterating Oosterweel's superiority, citizens became less, instead of more, trustful of its substantive qualities. As a reaction, Oosterweel opponents tried to force policymakers to open up the dialogue by organizing a referendum and starting the Meccano initiative.

However, rather than gaining entrance into the policy dialogue, they felt that their pleas were still being ignored. According to the policymakers, priority should be given to re-unifying the governmental ranks and re-branding Oosterweel. After having lost the referendum, policymakers wanted to restore internal governmental commitment to the project. However, the observation that policymakers could continue with a variant of the Oosterweel project and could ignore a serious alternative crafted by a consortium of protesters, business leaders and academics, left an imprint on Oosterweel opponents of procedures that were biased. This perception, in turn, re-

duced protester's trust in not just the substantive qualities of the Oosterweel project but also the policy procedures through which decisions on Oosterweel were reached.

ii. Trusting without footing? How procedural trust erosion hampers bargaining

The loss of public support was explained as "strong shoulders" becoming weak and as a government "forcing through" despite alternative views. We also discussed a third account used by all parties in the conflict: the "refusal to compromise" account. This account stressed that bargaining practices failed due to the other party's unwillingness to compromise. Such a compromise was seen as a crucial element of restoring public support. Each party expressed unhappiness with the prolongation of the conflict and explained failed attempts at reconciliation by pointing to the other party's unwillingness to compromise due to selfish motivations. Unlike branding practices that focus on communicating the project's substantive qualities, bargaining practices focus on the procedural level. As the conflict became increasingly protracted, policymakers explored whether action groups would accept and promote the project if they were granted some of their demands. Bargaining practices thus seek the restoration of public support in the crafting of a compromise. For bargaining to work, the procedure must be trusted. For opponents to stop their resistance in exchange for some of their demands being met, they need to trust procedural safeguards. However, attempts at bargaining in the Oosterweel process were only made after procedural trust had already eroded and negative memories of procedural behavior in the past had accumulated. In the absence of explicit institutional infrastructure available to safeguard the bargaining procedure (like, for example, a mediation process), the necessary trust to engage in bargaining was absent.

That absence of trust in the procedures was problematic for both parties. Allegations of leaked information led policymakers to be-

lieve that protesters would misuse the bargaining procedure to revive protest. The experience of policymakers allegedly breaking their promises led protesters to believe that governments would track back. Because each party blamed the other for failed bargaining attempts, attributing selfish personal motives to the other party, bargaining efforts contributed to further trust erosion on not just the procedural but also the relational level. Policymakers blamed action groups for egoistically blocking an important public project. Protesters accused policymakers of serving their ego rather than the public interest.

To conclude, the branding and bargaining practices used to manage public support required substantive and procedural trust but were implemented in a context of eroding trust in these same dimensions. At the beginning of the conflict, branding instruments were used while substantive trust in the Oosterweel project was eroding. Efforts to restore support through branding reinforced substantive trust erosion and contributed to the erosion of procedural trust. As the conflict dragged on, policymakers tried to regain support for Oosterweel through practices of bargaining. For bargaining practices to be successful, it is unnecessary to trust the other party's substantive arguments. Still, it is essential for each party to feel safe enough in the procedure to compromise. However, with procedural trust being low, efforts to restore public support through bargaining proved unsuccessful. Because each party blamed the other party's selfish motives for the failed negotiations, attempts at bargaining contributed to trust erosion on the relational dimension. The different practices to manage public support in the Oosterweel project, their trust corollary, and their effects in a context of trust-erosion, are summarized in the Table 2 .

iii. How policy practices for managing public support further eroded trust and escalated conflict

Branding and bargaining proved to be fatal remedies that fueled instead of appeased the

Table 2: *The effects of practices for restoring public support in the context of trust-erosion*

Practice	Remedy for building support	Manifestation	Trust corollary	Effect on trust-erosion
Branding	Communication from a unified policy front	Public campaigns; showing a unified front	Presupposes trust in a policy proposal	Those lacking substantive trust experience an erosion of trust on the level of procedures
Bargaining	Negotiating an agreement that both parties can support	Closed meetings between opposing parties	Presupposes trust in the system	Those lacking procedural trust experience an erosion of trust on the level of relationships

policy conflict. This failure can be attributed to the insensitivity to the context of declining trust in which these policy practices were performed.

Figure 1 represents the process of conflict escalation in Oosterweel. The conflict started as a substantive conflict. Oosterweel’s critics mainly emphasized that the project’s goals (building a new highway) would be incompatible with their goals (livability in Antwerp). Policymakers disagreed. Such substantive conflicts are at the core of democratic policy formation. Yet, a result of substantive conflict is trust erosion when it comes to policy proposals. Can the government deliver? Pressured by substantive questions, policymakers attempted to “restore public support” by branding the project. This practice did not end the conflict but contributed to escalation to the procedural level. The government responded to the substantive critique with public campaigns instead of opening up the procedures to include alternative views. As a result, critics increasingly lost trust in the procedures in addition to low trust in the government’s capacity for policymaking.

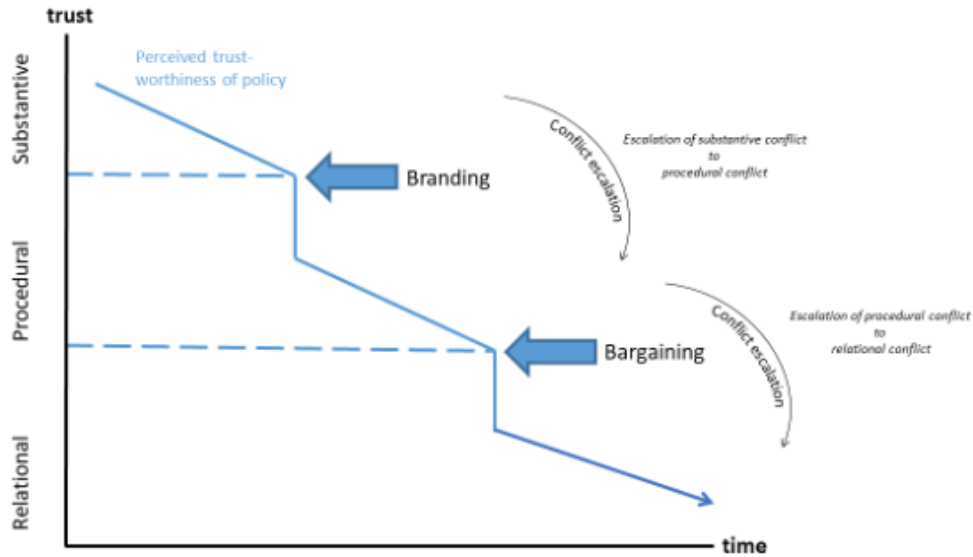
Trust in the procedure steadily declined. In the eyes of policymakers, protesters were set on obstructing existing policy procedures, while in the eyes of protesters, policymakers were set on forcing through their own policy agenda. A byproduct of this procedural conflict was the erosion of trust in the system of decision making. The practice of bargaining, which relies on each party committing to the procedure so that a substantive compromise can be reached, also had the opposite effect. Rather than ending the

conflict, as intended, bargaining contributed to an escalation of the conflict to the relational level. Lacking the necessary procedural trust for taking the leap of faith of compromising, each party refused to offer any leeway for fear of the other party abusing possible concessions. Each party blamed the other for the failed negotiations. Increasingly, parties expressed the belief that not only the substantive and the procedural goals of other parties were incompatible with their own, but so too were the personal goals. Policymakers increasingly saw protesters as egoistically motivated on resisting any proposal that would not fully match their own, no matter the costs. In turn, protesters increasingly saw policymakers as egoistically motivated political egos intent on promoting their personal political agenda, no matter the costs.

VI. CONCLUSION

Policy practices intended to end conflict can have the unintentional effect of further escalation when those practices are insensitive to the low trust context. We studied the case of the Oosterweelconnection, a planned multi-billion infrastructure project in Antwerp. When confronted with opposition, policymakers attempted to brand the project as the single best solution, supported by a unified policy front. Yet, branding reinforced the erosion of substantive trust in the project. Because contenders became increasingly suspicious of how policies were made, branding also contributed to the conflict’s escalation to the procedural dimension. In later stages of opposition, policy-

Figure 1: How practices to build public support backfired in the Oosterweel case



makers resorted to bargaining. Again, bargaining practices contributed to escalation rather than settlement because the procedural trust needed to make the bargaining process work already eroded. With each party blaming the other party for the failed negotiations, the conflict became increasingly relational.

These conclusions contribute to the emerging literature on policy conflicts in two important ways. First, we offer a theoretical understanding, inspired by the trust literature (Rothstein, 2000, 2013), to study the different phases of trust-erosion in policy conflict escalation. While the conflict mediation literature acknowledges the important role played by trust, the different dimensions of trust-erosion have, to our knowledge, not been theorized in relation to policy conflict escalation. Secondly, our study shows that practices to end policy conflict need to be calibrated to trust levels in the policies, procedures, and relations. Joint fact-finding (Karl et al., 2007), for example, would seem to be a good match for substantive conflict, possibly appropriate for procedural conflict provided that the safety of each party

is guaranteed but ill-matched for relational conflict. The chance of agreeing on facts seems very low when the other party's contributions are discounted based on malicious motives. A first step before embarking on any substantive discussions would then be to improve the relations between parties. Trust thus seems to be an essential factor for explaining the interaction between the cognitive dimensions of a policy conflict (how escalated is the conflict?) and its behavioral dimensions (what does that mean for action?) (Weible Heikkila, 2017).

This article hopes to add to the low-trust literature with the in-depth investigation of gradual trust-erosion. The (lack of) trust feeds forward in future interactions. It confirms the importance of fair policy procedures to mitigate trust erosion (Rothstein Teorell, 2008) and presents a theoretical mechanism that explains how the decline of procedural trust may affect relational trust. Rothstein (2000) points to the importance of feedback mechanisms in constructing a collective memory of trust. Encounters in policy conflicts and how governments deal with such conflicts may be one of the more

critical feedback mechanisms in building or losing trust. The causal direction of influence between policy conflicts and trust-erosion is a topic for further inquiry. Our study showed that the mobilization of specific practices could reinforce trust-erosion, but this may lead one to wonder whether trust-erosion can also inform the choice for a particular policy repertoire. Do governments, for instance, focus on the repertoire of managing public support because they already anticipate low trust from the general public in what they believe to be good policies? And do governments double down on branding practices rather than opening up substantive dialogue with critics because of a lack of substantive trust in the messages sent by protesters? There is some evidence of anticipation from our analysis, as governmental actors said they feared local resistance to their plans from the start and also painted the information provided by protesters in a highly negative light.

To study the causal chain of influence, we might want to look in more detail at the sequencing of different escalation processes in various policy conflicts. In the Oosterweel project, the conflict escalated from the substantive to the procedural and then the relational dimension. Theoretically, a conflict can start at any dimension and thus follow a different process of escalation. Future research could study the different routes of escalation, the effects of these routes on trust erosion and the possibilities for conflict settlement, and possible connections of specific pathways of escalation to particular types of policy conflict. Moreover, our study is a single case in a specific context of an urban infrastructure project in a developed liberal democracy. The repertoire of managing public trust and the meanings produced by actors may differ substantially in other policy sectors, in different countries, or in authoritarian regimes. An interesting topic may be how trust outside of the specific conflict affects dynamics within the conflict and the other way around. To further strengthen the external validity of the theoretical mechanism we identified, more case studies are needed.

Finally, this article has studied trust-erosion when practices are ill-matched to trust levels in policy conflicts. This begs the question of the types of practices suitable to reverse that dynamic and restore trust. Future research could study successful policy conflict settlement cases to analyze which practices, belonging to which repertoires, match which types of policy conflicts.

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