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The European commissions' climate policy norm

A comparative discourse analysis for finding and placing a
norm in its life cycle

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Abstract

This thesis uses norm research and a developed theoretical framework to find the 'climate policy norm' that affects and creates the argumentation for the European Commission's climate policy measures, and puts it on the life cycle of norms for the years 2019 and 2024. Through a comparative discourse analysis and qualitative data study, this paper develops the theoretical understanding of norm research. The traditional framework of the cycle of norms, emergence, cascade and internalisation is developed by adding another stage in the life cycle taken from previous scholars' research. The new stage is called 'tipping point' through which a norm in this framework can evolve. By finding the 'climate policy norm' in both years, the thesis succeeds in positioning the 'climate 'policy norm', in the tipping point and cascade stage for the year 2019 and in the internalization stage for the year 2024. The thesis accounts for a mixture of both traditional norm research and EU studies to widen the approach. Using the table of what constitutes the different stages of the norm life cycle, this paper shows that the variables that matter are covered by the table produced in the thesis. By showing how Ursula Von der Leyen argues for climate measures in the Mission letters given to the respective commissioner, the paper connects and shows the arguments in the ongoing general discourse that surrounds the European Commission is connected to how Von der Leyen chooses to express herself in the Mission letters. The connection between the arguments found in the data analysis and the norm found is visible.

Key words: Norm, The European Commission, Life cycle of norms, Norm evolution, Mission letters,

1. Introduction:

The EU claims to possess certain values such as, freedom, democracy, equality and human rights (European Union). Even though the EU has been described as possessing these values, questions have been raised during later times about what really constitutes the ideas and values of the EU. Organisations such as Amnesty International and EuroMed Rights have raised concerns about the EUs' migration policy, following the sudden rise of asylum seekers, as worsening the lives of migrants and risking exposing migrants to discrimination (O'Caroll, 2023). Furthering the critique towards the EU, Nick Witney warns about an institutional overreach that may diminish the sovereignty ideal that has been claimed to incuse the union (Witney, 2023) .

Above examples prove that norms are a precarious theme for scholars examining the EU and observers of the EU. Although one would have a hard time claiming that the EU is not incused by values such as human rights and shared sovereignty, examples prove that during certain events the union tends to step away from its observed core values to instead accept infringements on those same values. This begs a question about norms. What are norms, if they easily can be side-stepped as soon as one decides they no longer bear value and what are the parameters that should be measured when one examines norms? When and how do they change? If the EU decides to no longer adhere to the norms of sovereignty and human rights, could those values even be claimed to be the norms of the EU?

Researchers Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink have explained how norms exist in a life cycle. A norm can have different "behavioural logics" that dominate in different segments of the life cycle (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p. 888). Understanding how a norm is applied to a life cycle requires an understanding of the nature of norms and what mechanisms are at play when norms change or are replaced. The question for such research would rather be "What are the implications of the recent norm development in the EU?" or "Can we expect more infringements on human rights and member states sovereignty in the future?". This thesis will examine how the norms of the climate policies in the EU have developed in recent times through previous norm research, where scholars have examined the EU as a normative power (Manners, 2002) and developed frameworks for how one can observe and examine norms (Falkner, 2016). I will use such research to find the nature of the norm I call the ECs 'climate

policy norm’ as well as finding the nature of that norm by analysing recent Mission letters and the discourse surrounding the production of the letters. I will then put that norm on the scale of the life cycle through my own theoretical framework. To establish *where* norms are in their life cycle will help in answering above raised questions but also evolves the question. How do we know when a norm is accepted? How do we know a norm when we see one? Can we find specific norms within complicated institutions such as the EC? Therefore the research question in this thesis is formulated as: *“Where, in the life-cycle of norms, is the norm that constitutes the climate policies of the European Commission?”*

2. Disposition:

The initial section of this thesis will go through previous research focused on norms and how that shows the complexity of norm evolution theory. I will show how a norm researcher applies their theories and what ontological and practical challenges one may come onto using norm research. Then I will give account for how norm research has been used to examine the EU as a normative power, but also how it has been used to analyze the EU as a whole. A section where I combine the previous research with the theoretical framework will be needed to understand my later analysis. I will further show where I find research gaps and where my thesis will contribute to those. My method and theoretical framework will then be explained to create my research design. The next section is my analysis of my data, which will end with me placing the “climate policy norm” of the EC on its life cycle. For finishing my thesis, a discussion will be held about norm research and how my research design relates to the previous research section.

3. Previous research:

3.1 Norms in contestation:

Antoaneta Dimitrova and Mark Rhinard claim that a norm can be understood as having a life cycle and be viewed as existing in sets. To explain this, they describe how a norm often begins in contestation with another norm/norms and that different actors, varying from journalists to politicians, tend to affect the outcome of what the new norm will consist of. If an actor perceives that their society can profit from a norm change, there is a possibility that that actor will try to make their society go through a norm change. The contesting norms will

“compete” for recognition through different mechanisms, such as public debates or legislative reforms that seek to acknowledge the contesting norms. Actors within these mechanisms “pick sides” between the norms and discuss with each other. The new norm will be implemented for example indirectly as part of the culture of a society or directly in the form of legislation – or not – depending on how successfully the norm was argued for (Dimitrova & Rhinard, 2005 p. 13-16). This shows that analyzing a norm is more than just analyzing an idea or a value. Analyzing a norm demands focus on actors, societal prerequisites and an understanding of previous norms. The life cycle of a norm takes place in this framework where it is “born” because of a perceived need for it and “dies” in contestation with other, new norms. Dimitrova and Rhinard explain norms existing in sets as that norms should be viewed as “normative systems” where different norms affect and refer to different actors of a collectivity. Norms are also described as standards that exist to achieve an end goal (Dimitrova & Rhinard, 2005 p. 5). That would mean that multiple norms can be born, and affect different actors, for the ‘purpose’ of achieving a single or multiple end goal/s. Which in turn, put them in the same set of norms. At the same time, some norms in the same set can be rejected by some actors even though other norms in the set are accepted by the same actors (Dimitrova & Rhinard, 2005 p. 7-8).

3.2 Drawing conclusions from norm research:

An example of theoretical depth using norm research is how Milan van Berlo and Michal Natorski researched how populist parties in the EU have affected and argued regarding the foreign policies of the EU. They concluded that populist parties in the EU are inherently in the role of “opposition” and therefore does not affect texts issued by the European parliament regarding foreign policy. They do explain though, through theory stemming from norm research, that the development in the European political field could lead to that populist parties, in the future, possibly will have a significant influence (van Berlo & Natorski, 2020 p. 207-208). This case, generates an example of what norm research can result in and how one can use norm research for both analyzing the institutions and policies of today as well as what one can anticipate in the future. This is a norm research focused on how norms evolve within a community or institution and what one can draw from analyzing norms in a political contemporary field.

3.3 The foundation of norm research:

The school of norm research evolved from the social constructivist theorem. The definitions of the concept of a norm are many, Robert Axelrod for example explains it with “generalised standards of conduct that delineate the scope of a state’s entitlements, the extent of its obligations, and the range of its jurisdiction” and Amy Gorowitz defines it as “result from common practices among states” (Björkdahl, 2010 p.13-14). The definitions are too many to fully go through all and the debate was and is still ongoing on how one exactly can determine a norm when they see one.

Emanuel Adler puts forward the case that common terms used by scholars and academics to explain the international order is the result of social constructions. Drawing on ideas where transformations of identities affect and should be seen as an integral part of international actors and institutional patterns, as well as an indispensable part of the foundation for understanding the “social construction of international reality” (Adler, 1997 p. 343-348). Furthermore, Adler explains that the international reality is a result of social constructions built upon cognitive structures that creates the “purposeness” for its actors (Adler, 1997 p. 319). In other words, the social construction of the world affects its actors’ interactions in ways that can not be explained through the material structure of the world but rather through the actors interpretation of the material world (Adler, 1997 p. 321-323).

There is a rationalist and reflectivist perspective in international theory where social constructivists have claimed to hold a middle ground perspective. That is because constructivists share reflectivists’ understanding of identity and discourse and also attributes ideational phenomena independent ontological positions while at the same time accepting causal mechanisms in the same way a rationalist would (Björkdahl, 2010 p.10). For instance, theories surrounding rational actors does not entirely exclude social constructs in that the concept of rationality found in the Realism school of thought (Rational Actor theories, amongst others) could be said to be an ontological assumption or theoretical standing point (Schmidt & Wight, 2023, p. 158-178) which would mean that the empirical weight of social constructivists is not diminished by default, just put aside for the sake of coherent theoretical frameworks or conclusions made by rationalists. Finnemore and Sikkink also draws on this fact by acknowledging that even from a rationalist standpoint one needs to be aware that the material reality as it is being described by a constructivist still is a matter of a subjective interpretation (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p.910-911). A common notion more popular in

recent times is that norms do not exist simply as a dichotomous fact (existing/not existing). Mona Lena Krook and Jacqui True explicitly formulates how the conceptualization of norms can be explained as dynamic processes rather than static things for understanding how norms can emerge and diffuse. They have observed two main findings regarding how one can operate within norm research. They speak about internal and external dynamisms that drive norm change. Firstly, “internal” dynamisms related to norms which is exemplified by internal debates focused on the norm at hand and secondly “external” dynamisms which are stemming from changes in “broader normative environments” (Krook & True, 2010 p.122-123). This meaning, that norms should be observed both as being able to originate (coming to existence) in and of itself in its nature and also as a result of previous norms and influencing mechanisms.

Finnemore and Sikkink touches on Krook and Trues’ definition and also puts forward a framework for how one can optimize and fortify the concept of norms. They have different focal points through which the emergence and internalization of a norm takes form in institutions (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p.888-889). With time, social-constructivist theory has developed from talking about ideas and social constructions as important aspects of constructivism towards a method of finding, explaining and theorizing explicitly about norms. The evolution from a simple social-constructivist tool towards enabling norm research as a school of its own is therefore established. An example would be Judith Kelleys’ work on norms and how she used the framework that Finnemore and Sikkink evolved to find answers on how election monitoring could go from being rarely implemented to widely used in the 1990s and 2000s (Kelley, 2008).

4. The EC and EU and norm research:

4.1 The weight of the EC:

The European Commission (EC) is a politically independent and executive branch of the EU. It proposes new laws, implements policies, allocates grants, makes sure that EU-laws are being followed and represents the EU internationally. The decisions being made in the EC should always protect the interests of the EU-citizens (European Union 2). One should view the ECs work as a result of political bargaining and agreements that result in specific portfolios and the appointment of the commissioners. The commissioners are appointed

through nomination in the European council and through voting in the European Parliament. The commissioners are expected to supply political leadership within the Commission as well as for the union as a whole (Cini, 2006 s. 236). Historically the EC has associated itself with political or agenda setting functions (Cini 2006, s. 239).

4.2 Norm research in relation to EU studies:

Johanna Speyer and Nils Stockmann seek to explain the role of the norm researcher in relation to EU-studies and the purposeness of norm research in understanding the development of the EU. They claim that the norm contestation, that is when norms “compete” and change to create a new norm/new norms, within the EU is misunderstood since norms have a tendency to interact with each other and intertwine. They claim that there is a dichotomous relationship between norms explaining them as going through *collisions* rather than being conflictive. They mean that norm contestation research can be used to examine how a changing global environment affects the policymaking in the EU and by that, how the external changes thus affect the norms that constitutes the EU. They point explicitly towards important actors such as the EC being leading actors for norm change within the EU since their status and ability to affect the EU as a whole is great. Furthermore, the recent development, where the Covid19-pandemic and the Russian war in Ukraine has affected the EU a lot, points towards norm change in especially the security and energy sector. But also other sectors have been affected. The EC was important in leading the norm change within the EU towards an “active subsidiarity” for example (Speyer & Stockmann, 2024 p. 906-907).

4.3 EU as a normative power:

EU as a normative power has been widely discussed amongst scholars that seek to define the EU's impact in the world. Researchers such as Ian Manners, Daniel Hardwick have discussed whether or not the EU can be seen as a normative power in the world. Manners conceptualizes the EU and its role as a normative power in the world. He claims that the most important factor for explaining the EU as a normative power is not what it says or does, but rather what it *is* (Manners, 2002 p.241). For him, the question at hand is whether or not the EU could be seen as a normative power in the world. He concludes that the EU is based on a normative but also that the EU can be seen as a normative power because of how they tend to

be wanting and succeeding in exporting these normatives around the world (Manners, 2002 p.252).

Hardwick questions Manners' notion that the EU can be said to be a normative power. He refers to the fact that he believes that the EUs' actions and their expressed wants regarding exporting its values and norms does not co-aligne with each other. The values that they express are, according to Hardwick, not the values that they implement. Hardwick claims that the EUs' values consist of an idea of "common good" where multipluralism or individual rights are part of that "common good". He further acknowledges that the EU has maintained different values depending on the case. Cultural and social differences between countries leads to that the EU seems to act differently depending on which actor the EU deals with. Hardwick also claims that EUs' own interests also play a part in how the EU acts. He puts the EU in between a realist and idealistic state where the EUs' identity differs depending on what theory one chooses to analyze the EU through (Hardwick, 2011 p. 3-5).

4.4 External impact and the implications for norm research:

Furthermore, Gerda Falkner describes EU policy making as a result of how much pressure the involved member states are facing. In 2016 she wrote that if the EU does not succeed in effectively meeting the problem-solving needs, the actors in the EU will reconsider their previous positions (Falkner, 2016, p.227). Looking at how the bank runs during the eurozone crisis in 2008 and the migration flows towards the EU in recent times, has resulted in a "trigger of change" where external impact has rendered significant actions (Falkner, 2016, p.221-222). It resulted in certain measures taken by the EU such as financial markets regulations or support for member states heavily affected by migration (Falkner, 2016 p. 228). She concludes that the measures taken by the EU does not fully cover the needs of its citizens. Migration and foreign policy was not fully implemented to take care of the problems the member states faed and the discussion about these kinds of measures resulted in a "stalemate" where no particular progress was being made, although one could see a breakthrough in finance policy where the EU re-valued and implemented new measures to secure financial stability in the union (Falkner, 2016 p.231).

5. Theory and previous research:

Finnemore and Sikkink sets out a framework through which one can examine a norm and how one can place a norm on the scale of “life cycle of norms” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p. 895-898). This has been used and further explained by scholars such as Judith Kelley, Matthew Hoffmann, Andrea Knapp and Jonas Fritzler, which will all be used to explain the framework of how one can put a norm in its life cycle.

5.1 Stages of norms:

	Stage 1 Norm emergence	Stage 2 Norm cascade	Stage 3 Internalization
Actors	Norm entrepreneurs with organizational platforms	States, International organizations, networks	Law, professions, bureaucracy
Motives	Altruism, Empathy, Ideational commitment	Legitimacy, reputation, esteem	Conformity
Dominant mechanisms	Persuasion	Socialization, institutionalization, demonstration	Habit, institutionalization

Table 1: “Stages of norms” in Finnemore & Sikkink (1998) “*International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*”, p.898.

In this table, one can see the different stages of how a norm emerges up to the point where it is internalized. Dominant mechanisms are at play during different stages, actors are the main drivers of the norm change and motives should be seen as the ‘goal’ of the norm during that stage. For example the norm needs to have an *ideational commitment*-factor to it for norm entrepreneurs to use it for their *persuasion*. That is, the norm needs to be formalized in a way that makes it possible for norm entrepreneurs to ideationally commit to the norm. Otherwise there would not be a norm entrepreneur, and thus, no norm emergence at all.

5.2 Norm life cycle:

Finnemore and Sikkink have also demonstrated a scale where one can put a norm on a life cycle.

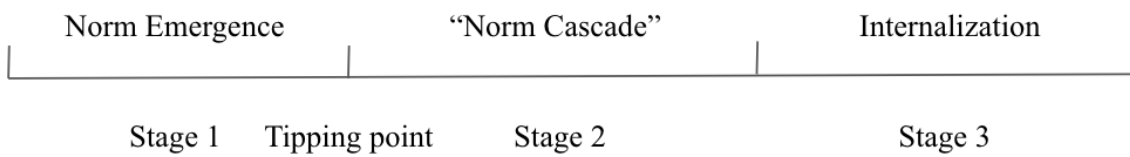


Figure 1: “Stages of norms” in Finnemore & Sikkink (1998) *“International Norm Dynamics and Political Change”*, p.896.

Since it is a life cycle of norms, one should view a norm as living. It is born through the emergence, it cascades (are spread out) after the tipping point and it internalizes itself.

5.3 Norm evolution:

1. Emergence

	Actors	Motives	Dominant mechanisms
Emergence Första stadiet	Norm entrepreneurs (Organizational platforms)	Ideational commitment	Persuasion

From table 1

Judith Kelley argues that a new norm can “emerge” when actors need to legitimize its status in the world order. Kelley explains the concept of emergence through how election monitoring could become a norm, even though its nature went against some of the existing norms.

After the second world war, pressure was put on states to implement measures that strengthened principles such as self-determination, freedom of expression, free and periodic elections and non-interference in internal affairs (Kelley, 2008 s. 226). This also constituted the norms in the western world after the war. That being stated, with time the widespread implementation of election monitoring took place four decades later. The popularity of election monitoring grew rapidly in the 1990s. Even though the idea of election monitoring in many ways breaks with the idea of self-determination and non-interference, the implementation of the measures of election monitoring were made possible through the

emergence of humanitarian interventions. Humanitarian interventions strengthened the link between democracy and human rights which was found to be more important than sovereignty and self-determination at the time. When the arguments for sovereignty were weakened the implementation of other measures that neglected the norm of non-interference could grow, thus election monitoring became a prevalent occurrence after the cold war in the 1990s. Election monitoring in and of itself created new debates that strengthened the norm of election monitoring (Kelley, 2008 s. 226-227). This also shows that new norms need to be built upon existing norms.

A norm entrepreneur is a person or persons that take the forefront for new norms to be established. They “create” problems by enlightening the public through language that names and dramatizes the “new” problem. This procedure is called *persuasion*. These new norms always emerge in a competitive normative space where they stand in conflict with already accepted norms or in conflict with certain established interests. A norm entrepreneur furthermore needs a motivation or an *ideational commitment* behind why they seek to create a new norm. A norm entrepreneur often works from international organizations that already have multiple norms that they themselves stand on. This leads to that norm entrepreneurs seek to affect the organisation they work within and/or states that are meaningful for certain measures to be implemented. In this thesis this process will be called *ideational commitment*. Through arguments that upheave the new norm they want to promote, the norm entrepreneur regularly seeks to achieve a new “logic” that makes the new norm possible. Previous norms need to be made “inappropriate” for the new norm to take place. Certain facts can speak for a new norm, but also moral implications can create space for new norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p. 896-899). Norm entrepreneurs are essential for norm change but research has found that norm entrepreneurs are given less importance when the field of change grows larger in population (Hoffmann 2003, p. 22). This being stated, norm entrepreneurs are still said to have an effect, albeit norm evolution tends to happen at a higher degree dynamically the bigger the affected population is (Hoffmann 2003).

The organizational platform is the room that is of interest for the norm entrepreneur. International organizations that promote and work through many norms are often of higher interest for norm entrepreneurs (Such as the EU or the UN). Their purpose and agenda are bigger than just promoting one certain norm, which many other organizations do, such as the Red Cross, Greenpeace or other NGOs (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 s. 899).

2. Cascade

	Actors	Motives	Dominant mechanisms
Cascade Tredje stadiet	States, international organisations, Networks	Legitimacy, reputation	Socialization and institutionalization

From Table 1

When a norm cascades, which would mean that a norm spreads wider and faster after the tipping point (Kelley, 2008 s. 229-230), certain actors and mechanisms become more relevant. The *legitimacy* or *reputation* takes form in a process where the commitment to the norm is already established amongst the actors that lead the norm change. This should be viewed as gaining legitimacy following the systemic changes that resulted in the implementation of the new norm. That is that an actor through legislation or other means has implemented measures that establishes the new norm in their field of action. The norm is therefore being spread through the discussion following the implementation of the norm. That is, *socializing* or *institutionalizing* the norm. Actors that do not want to implement the new norm can in this case feel forced to do it, following the *legitimacy* process that has strengthened the norm, thus, strengthening the norm even more (Kelley, 2008 p. 229-230). The *networks* in that case, forces the *states* or *international organisations* to implement a norm through *socialization* or *institutionalization* to gain *legitimacy* in their *network*.

3. Internalization

	Actors	Motives	Dominant mechanisms
Internalization Fjärde stadiet	Professionals, bureaucrats	Conformity, Measure-creating	Habitual institutionalization

From table 1

Norms may cascade to the level that it becomes part of an *habitual institutionalization*. The norm has been accepted by actors and is being seen as taken as a given. Habitually institutionalized norms are therefore hard to observe since they are not part of a distinct discussion. At the same time, these kinds of norms should be seen as the most powerful since they tend to slip through the barrier that new norms do not have to. *Professionals* or *bureaucrats* are given high value since they are the implementers of the norm through their professional action. Organizations decide to create a framework through which these norms are both followed and strengthened. The *professionals* create a *habitual institutionalization*, thus the *conformity* and *measure-creating* motives become present (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p. 904-905).

6. Research gap and contribution:

Johanna Speyer and Nils Stockmann argue that for understanding the EU, it is necessary that EU studies and norm research intertwine and are sewn together. The quick succession of global and regional crises has made the question of advancing the understanding of leading world actors more urgent in recent times (Speyer & Stockmann, 2023 p.902). Krook and True are of the opinion that modern norm research has the potential to further advance scholars' understanding of the EU and even contribute to the institutional work being done regarding international relations (Krook & True, 2010 p. 106). If one further understands what the actors in the global field are being made up of, one can more easily observe and promote positive change. My work can be used for future prospects within the EU network and institutions.

Researchers about the EU as a normative power in the world need to understand what constitutes the norm of the EU. Researching about how the EU affects the rest of the world implies that one knows what values and norms the EU is made up by and successful predictions about what the EU as a normative power would achieve precedes that the researchers know the goals and endmeans of the EU, where norm research could be used to identify those goals and endmeans. For scholars to take after researchers such as Ian Manners and Daniel Hardwick, the collected research needs to make sure what the EU wants, now and in the future. Norm evolution theory can explain the, according to Manners, most important aspect of examining the EU as a normative power. It is not about what the EU says or what it does, but what it *is* that matters the most (Manners, 2002 p. 241).

The question of the EU as a global actor is contested and many researchers claim to have found lacking arguments in others' scholarly research about the EU. The debate between Manners and Hardwick proves that an introspective view on the EU is needed for reaching further conclusions about the EU as a normative power and Falkner observes how external impact creates norm change within the union. Their research still does not fully answer the question of what the nature of the EU values and norms is, which is what I seek to find, analyzing the ECs "climate policy norm".

Viewing norms as part of a dynamic process leads one to the conclusion that for understanding the science about certain norms, one needs to analyze the evolution of values and identities from the beginning of time. This is, of course not possible, but through viewing norms as being created in cycles, as Finnemore, Sikkink, Dimitrova and Rhinard does, one can find "starting points" and "end points" for norms. My analysis of the ECs "climate policy norm" will answer how one can use norm research to develop a norm research framework to adequately situate a norm on the life cycle.

My work can furthermore be developed into different policy fields, where one can analyze certain contemporary policy areas and where the norms of the respective areas are situated in the cycle. Thus, I will create a foundation from which one can analyze the policies of the EC and the implications that that has for the future of the EU. The voters need to know the values of their leaders and citizens need to know how the EUs values and norms develop. My research will help with that.

7. Research design and method:

My research question is "*Where, in the life-cycle of norms, are the norms that constitute the climate policies of the European Commission?*". For this I will use the EC as a focal point of analysis because, as Cini mentioned, the commission is the collected outcome of political bargaining and agreements in the EU as a whole, while its formation goes through a long process that spans across both the European Council and the EP (Cini, 2006 p236). Thus, examining the EC, could be said to be the best way of finding the collected norms of what makes up the EU and thus, the most important institution within the EU when analyzing policy norms.

7.1 Selection of data:

For my analysis, I will use a set of data which consists of:

1. The **Mission Letters** given to the commissioners at the beginning of their term of office. Elections to the European Commission are held at the beginning of each term. The commissioners tasks and work portfolio are determined by what is written in the Mission Letters. These should be viewed as ‘working documents’ and can be used to find where the norms are in the life cycle through how they argue for certain measures and wills. The Mission Letters used for this analysis are the letters from 2019 (Mission letters 2019) and 2024 (Mission letters, 2024). This time frame is chosen because the elections of new commissioners are held after the general election. The EC presented ‘the European Green Deal’ (EGD) after the election in 2019. The EGD is an all-encompassing framework that covers many fields of work in the EC, implementing climate policy in different policy fields has had a substantial impact on many of the commissioners work portfolios (European Commission).
2. I will make use of the **general discourse** surrounding the election of the commissioners and other relevant discussions, for example articles that are about the doings of the EC or speeches made by leaders within the EU, to further my understanding of the norms that are at play for shaping the EC and the EU at the time. The general discourse is part of the norm contestation that affects the norms of the EC and therefore the public discussion is important for my analysis.

7.2 Research design:

I will implement a comparative discourse analysis using a qualitative data analysis, applied on my selection of data. The analysis will be made comparing the mission letters from 2019 and 2024 as well as the general discourse surrounding the ECs climate policies around that time. What I intend to investigate is how one can place the norms regarding climate policy on the life cycle scale.

Social constructivist research often stems in and accepts discourse analysis as a way of finding the social realities that the world is made up of (Björkdahl, 2002, p. 10). The method will give me a deeper understanding of the norms that were present between the different years. A different placement of the norms on the life cycle scale can thus be made through my choice of method and data. According to my theoretical framework, the norms that were present in the Mission letters and during the 2019 debate should have evolved and possibly taken another shape in the debate 2024. Furthermore, one key aspect in using discourse analysis is the fact that it is in the arguments between different actors one can find the norm contestation. It is in the written and spoken words I can find the norms that create the arguments, which make my choice of using discourse analysis justified. Norm entrepreneurs tend to use their language to ‘speak’ problems into existence which mean that they leave a trace that a discourse analyst can find by analyzing the form of arguments (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p. 892). Furthermore, for analyzing the different steps in the life cycle of norms, discourse analysis can be used to find, for example, how the systemic changes are viewed upon – which make way for how the actors decide to deal with the systemic changes – and thus, I can find the norm, at different places on the life cycle, through analysing arguments made over time. As scholars such as Speyer and Stockmann have argued and as Human Rights organizations have indicated, norm change of importance has occurred within the EU regarding certain norms.

7.3 Variables:

The independent variables that I will analyze are the *actors*, *motives* and *dominant mechanisms* that can be found in the table of my theoretical framework which will be found in the next section. The dependent variable will be the placement of the ECs “climate policy norm”.

7.4 Summary of method:

This will be made through a two step method where I:

1. Analyse the data to find the norms that are at play for the climate policy of the EC (2019 and 2024).
2. Put these norms on a life cycle scale.

7.5 Limitations:

This thesis has its limitations because of how I chose to structure it. I will not fully describe the ECs “climate policy norms” nature through analyzing just the general discourse and the mission letters. More aspects need to be taken into consideration when one examines a norm. I am seeking out to find a norm through norm research and place it on a life cycle. This means that I will not fully go through what the norm consists of.

My narrow data will not be able to answer my research question to 100%. Furthermore I am choosing to focus on the EC explicitly. The EC is important but I will not analyse debates in the European parliament or in the European council for example. This will lead to missed discussions and arguments. The general discourse is broad and going through every written or spoken argument is not possible. I will limit myself to finding prominent actors and scholars who fit into my theoretical framework to then use their argumentation for reaching a conclusion. Feeling the need to put emphasis on my section ‘previous research’, for an adequate explanation of norm research, has also led to the fact that my analysis will be limited in the amount of sources I can account for in my general discourse.

Also, I have sought out to find the “climate policy norm”. As previous research has shown, the discussion about what constitutes a norm is still ongoing. I will need to make a qualitative assumption about what the norm is. Is a norm a diffuse “generalised standard” or is it a “result from common practices among states” (Björkdahl, 2010 p.13-14). A norm can be said to be many things, even here I will need to use my limited theoretical framework for making a qualitative assessment of what the norm that I am looking for is.

8. My theoretical framework:

8.1 This thesis’ theoretical framework:

The previous research establishes the basis for my own theoretical framework that I am creating for this thesis. I am creating my own table based on the table that Finnemore and Sikkink brought forward, with a new stage called tipping point. This table will be the foundation for my analysis.

	Stage 1 Emergence	Stage 2 Tipping point	Stage 3 Cascade	Stage 4 Internalization
Actors	Norm entrepreneurs (International organisations)	Significant external actors, Member states, Bureaucrats	States, international organisations, Networks	Professionals, bureaucrats
Motives	Ideational commitment	Answering to a system change or external impact	Legitimacy, reputation	Conformity, Measure-creating
Dominant mechanisms	Persuasion	Elections, Political upheavals, Changed conditions	Socialization and institutionalization	Habitual institutionalization

Table 2

The life cycle of a norm using this table look like this:

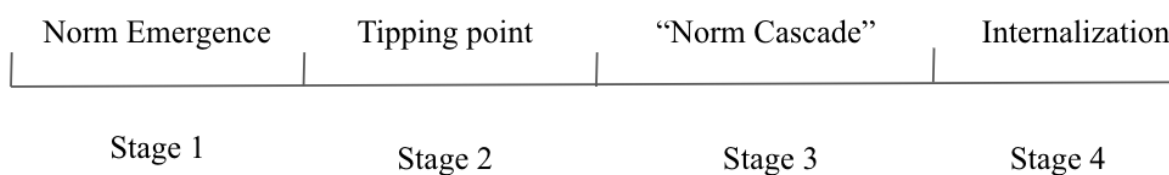


Figure 2

The tipping point stage:

	Actors	Motives	Dominant mechanisms
Tipping point	Significant external actors, Member states, Bureaucrats	Answering a system change or external impact	Elections, Political upheavals

From Table 2

I have created a new stage which I call *Tipping point*, wherein the tipping point process takes place. My reasoning for giving the tipping point more acknowledgement in my theory is the fact that Knapp, Fritzler and Kelley describe those mechanisms as part of the norms life cycle. Norm researchers have also shown and requested more research to describe what the nature of the tipping point consists of. Also, if I find the norm to be within a tipping point (that would mean that for example, an *external impact* has laid the foundation for the norm to *cascade* but it has not started to cascade yet), putting it in the *emergence* stage would not correctly describe it. Likewise, I can not put it in the *cascade* stage, since that process has not necessarily begun. I claim that one more stage is needed to fully comprehend the nature of a norm since its positionality becomes clearer with this extra stage.

The concept of the tipping point is of importance for acknowledging a change. When a norm dissolves and is being replaced, this happens through a sequence where the previous norm weakens and the new norm strengthens. The point in time where a new norm enters and can be said to be accepted and followed is called a tipping point (Kelley, 2008 s. 227). The tipping point has been reached for example when a certain new norm has been implemented through institutional action (The *bureaucrats* would here be the persons implementing the institutional action or important persons in significant institutions in society).

Elections can be essential for the establishment of a new norm. When one looks through election history one can find examples of how new norms became possible through *elections* (Knapp & Fritzler, 2025 s. 74). Elections make way for new leaders with new ideas to overtake the daily narrative. Ideological as well as practical differences between leaders makes it easier for a norm switch to take place, Judith Kelley for example regards “*political upheaval*” as important for new leaders to “construct a new order” (Kelley, 2008 s. 228). At the same time as elections are important for norm shifts to take place one also needs to acknowledge that the new leaders need to “build upon” previous norms (Knapp & Fritzler, 2025 s. 74-75).

Significant external actors in this realm would be actors that are not part of the organization it affects but still has a prevalent effect on the organization. That does not mean that the external actor is stronger or is being seen as dangerous but rather that the external actor is behaving in a way that needs to be reciprocated **according to the existing norms** (Knapp & Fritzler, 2025 s. 94). This meaning, that a *systemic change* has taken place which is perceived

as needing to be answered to. Also, Krook and Trues' reflections on dynamism shows that a norm can develop both through a change in the broader normative environment, but also through internal debates focused on the norm at hand (Krook & True, 2010 p.122-123).

The rest of my framework is based on the framework that Finnemore and Sikkink gave account of (See *table 1* and *figure 1*), developed by a number of scholars and the previous research outlined in this thesis. I will formulate for how that framework can be applied towards the EC and the EU and contribute to a rewarding discourse analysis that can be used in placing the climate policy norm of the EC on the scale of the life cycle of norms.

9. Empirical analysis:

9.1 The Mission letters 2019 and 2024:

The structure of the mission letters follow the same pattern in how they are written throughout the years. Ursula Von der Leyen, as the chairman of the European Commission, first writes a small paragraph that is the same for every commissioner. This paragraph is the introduction that puts forward general goals and ideas about what constitutes the framework for the rest of the mission letters. The introduction can be seen as an agitational motivation for why the EU chooses to act and focus on the measures that they seek to implement. For my analysis the introduction should therefore be regarded as important in placing "Climate policy norm" in the life cycle between 2019 and 2024.

9.2 The Mission Letters 2019 and 2024, the introduction:

The introduction in the letters from 2019 has a focus that is multifaceted. The challenges are described as being based on "*climate, digital technologies and geopolitics*". Furthermore one can distinguish the words being used to describe what the EU stood before and how these words were being used. "Big issues" such as "changes in climate, digital technologies and geopolitics" are having a "profound effect" on the EU's population. Von der Leyen describes "major shifts" in global power structures and local politics. These "transformations" must be met with "ambition and determination" from the EU. She puts emphasis on the fact that the EU is responsible for "what kind of world our children live in" as well as "defin(e)ing Europe's place in the world". Following this, Von der Leyen explains that the "job for the

European Commission will be to lead, to grasp the opportunities and to tackle the challenges that these changes present”. She proclaims that “each Commissioner will ensure the delivery of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals within their policy area”.

When it comes to the introduction of the letters from 2024 a shift in tone emerges. Von der Leyen instead describes a “time of great global instability”. Focus here lies on “strength and unity” instead of ambition and determination. The political guidelines, referenced in the introduction, points out that the EC needs to “ensure our (The EU’s) security in every sense in a more dangerous and turbulent world”. This will be done by strengthening the prosperity, the social market and making progress towards the new green and digital transitions.

9.3 The 2019 Mission Letters:

Von der Leyen gives Frans Timmermans the mission of leading the green deal, arguing that it is an urgent “moral, human and political obligation” to “protect our planet”. She claims that the climate goals need to be more ambitious and that other emitters in the world need to be at the same ambition level as the EU. She also proclaims that the green policies have an “long-term economic imperative”. That meaning, the actors that act the fastest towards green policy will be the actors that benefit from the ecological transition. Furthermore she proclaims that the green deal needs to be made through “Enforcement and implementation of legislation on climate, energy, environment and all other relevant policies”. Furthermore she wants a new climate culture to be instilled in Europe (Mission Letter FT, 2019 p. 4-6). The Mission Letter given to Valdis Dombrovskis is focused on an economy that works for the people. She claims that prosperity and social fairness goes hand in hand and that that model is unique for the EU. Peoples’ welfare should be put above all else. Furthermore, she means that “Europe’s competitiveness and strategic autonomy in key value chains” should be promoted to ensure that a “level playing field” is created in relation to the EUs’ “competitors and strategic partners”.

An improvement of financial stability and a protection of savers and investors are emphasized. She also connects Dombrovskis’ work to the green and digital transitions. (Mission Letter VD, 2019 p. 4-6). The Mission Letter focusing on the agriculture of the EU is often referring to the climate. For example a “zero-pollution ambition” is mentioned in regards to food production and a climate neutrality focus shows that the climate is at focus for

the agricultural sector of the EU. Also, emphasis is put on promoting “Europe’s high-quality food standards worldwide” (Mission Letter JW, 2019 p. 4-5). The commissioner for environment and oceans, Virginijus Sinkevicius, is tasked with preserving and protecting “Europe’s seas and oceans, its landscapes and natural environment”. Here, the “zero-pollution ambition” is also mentioned as well as the fact that promoting “sustainable food” is at the forefront for food production in the Union (Mission Letter VS, 2019 p.4-5). The technological development should be continued by creating measures that serve the purpose of advancing the understanding of the development. The youth of the EU should be helped through the Erasmus+ programmes and the “excellence and networking among European universities” should be promoted through development of already existing measures (Mission Letter MG, 2019 p. 4-5). Because of the fact that the EU is described as being founded on the values of “improving working conditions, living standards and access to opportunities”, the wages should rise on the labour market, labour conditions should be improved through dialogue within the EU and the quality and skills of the workforce should be increased through “quality-assured training”. Furthermore the “skills-shortage” needs to be reduced (Mission Letter NS, 2019 p.4-5).

9.4 Summary of the 2024 Mission Letters:

The European Green Deal is proclaimed to be successful. The work towards reaching the climate target goals is claimed to be important. The work of Wopke Hoekstra, who has the role as Commissioner for Climate, Net Zero and Clean Growth, is described as “vital”. Taxation is described as “a crucial role in supporting Europe’s competitiveness, prosperity and social fairness”. A “Clean industrial deal” should be **built as a complement to the European Green Deal** and **already existing legal frameworks** should continue to be implemented. The work regarding carbon management should be developed and “climate diplomacy” is seen as a normal role in international negotiations. Hoekstra is also ordered to “counter the growing trend of climate disinformation with a combination of honest and science based information and compelling storytelling about the threats of climate change” (Mission Letter WH, 2024 p. 5-7). Dan Jörgensen, the Commissioner-designate for energy and housing, received a Mission Letter that also acknowledges the European Green Deal. Jörgensen will build upon already existing infrastructure and lessen the dependency on gas as well as other measures “to reduce Europe’s dependencies”. His work should also make use of the development of “digitalisation and AI in the energy sector”. The “crises of the past years”

is described as having had a negative “impact on the quality of life of many Europeans”. This makes way for a new plan “for affordable and sustainable housing” (Mission Letter DJ, 2024 p. 5-7). Sustainability is also present in the discussion about agriculture. “Climate-risk preparedness” and crisis management are put in focus and Von der Leyen orders the responsible commissioner Christophe Hansen to develop “appropriate instruments” to create measures in response to a challenged agricultural sector (Mission Letter CH, 2024 p. 5-6).

Jessika Roswall, the commissioner for environment, water Resilience and a competitive Circular Economy, should also build upon the framework of the European Green Deal. Roswall should work to “facilitate public and private investment in technology and cross-border water infrastructure” and attention is paid towards sustainability and zero-pollution ambitions (Mission Letter JR, 2024 p. 5-6).

9.5 Analysis, the general discourse:

The emphasis on climate is visible throughout many of the Mission letters. To be able to further analyze the climate policy norm that affects the formulations in the mission letters, one needs to analyze the general discourse to be able to find the norms that are at play and where one can put them on the life cycle scale. The norm that I can find, analyzing the Mission Letters is that the EU claims to be needing to develop the climate policies even more.

9.5.1 The climate discourse before the 2019 Mission Letters:

Zac Tate, writing for the World Economic Forum (WEF), claims that rising emissions will have negative climate and economic effects. The need for managing rising emissions is argued for by acknowledging that public finance can help us in battling climate change. He argues that policy makers need to create “the conditions under which the green transition can happen”. Furthermore, emphasis was put on the fact that, at the time, the prevailing global warming accelerated (Tate, 2018). Furthermore, other important actors such as companies also made way for the European Green Deal. The ‘Barilla Center for food and nutrition’ argued that they wanted the ideals of a greener future to be implemented in concrete actions made by the EC. They refer to the UNs “Sustainable Development Goals” and claim that the implementations of the EC regarding agricultural reforms appear appropriate but still are not

enough. They request a more comprehensive framework where the agricultural sector can navigate through a more comprehensive framework that helps them in battling climate change (Barilla Center, 2017). Italian researchers claim that Italy could benefit if the EU combined economic reforms with ambitious climate policies in an integrated, synergistic manner (Tagliapietra et. al, 2018). The European Policy Centre, which gathers major companies, professional and business associations, foundations and civil society groups in Europe, argues for the same kind of measures. Describing a fairly detailed system which is similar to what became the European Green Deal (Giuli, 2018).

Jos Delbeke and Peter Vis focus their discussion about the EU climate policy on the future. They described the climate policies at the time as helping in making the EU more prepared for more comprehensive climate policies in the future. They proclaim that leading EU leaders saw the need for developing climate policy-making in the future, making the climate policies of the EU more interrelated with other policy fields (Delbeke & Vis, 2016 p. 108-112).

The Mission letters show that the EC implemented measures that directly answered to what the society as a whole demanded. Measures that create the “enforcement and implementation of legislation on climate, energy, environment and all other relevant policies” that Von der Leyen wrote to Timmermans (Executive Vice President designate for the European Green Deal) were mentioned in the 2019 Mission letter. The connection to the demands from WEF, the European Policy Centre and the Barilla center for food and nutrition are marked in the Mission letters from 2019. A broad perspective on climate policies are implemented where many of the 2019 Mission letters are connected to the European Green Deal. It should be mentioned that Von der Leyen argues for these climate measures by recognising the economical benefits for the union (Mission Letter FT, 2019 p. 4).

There was also an election that paved the way for the new measures to be established. The institutional system is built upon that the Commission formulates a new plan every fifth year. This makes the problem formulation and ambitions clear for an observer.

9.5.2 Conclusion, the norm in the 2019 Mission letter and where to put it on its life cycle:

The norm that I have found would be formulated as:

'The EC needs to have organised, coherent and extensive climate policies that respond to the accelerating global warming'. In the same way that Kelley used the life cycle of norms to place the norm of 'election monitoring', that in and of itself is a pretty complex norm, I have found this norm in my analysis. If I would shorten the norm, As Kelley did, to for example "The climate policy" or something similar, that would not fully encompass the norm. To fully explain the norm that I have found and to maintain the full essence of the norm. I will use the above formulation to explain the norm that I have found. The norm 'the climate policy' would perhaps be enough had the EC never implemented climate policy before, which is the case in Kelleys analysis of the election monitorings' spread. The norm and the discussion about the norm is built upon already existing measures and policies, and thus my norm has been found.

Before I place this norm in the life cycle, the nature of the norm, as it is argued for in the Mission letters and the general discourse, needs to be clarified. In the debate and discussion leading up to the Mission letter, the norm existed in the Tipping point stage of its life cycle. *Significant external actors* such as Tate argued that the accelerating climate change (*System change*) needed to be *answered to*. At the same time, the *election* made it possible to create the framework (the Mission letters) for which the new *organised, coherent and extensive climate policies* disclosed themselves. As Knapp and Fritzler accounted for, elections have an important part in making a norm evolve (Knapp & Fritzler, 2025 s. 74-75). Delbeke, in his role of Professor at the European University Institute, (European University Institute) and the EU leaders exemplify *bureaucrats*. All this being said, the norm also can be defined as being in the third stage of the life cycle. The EC has implemented climate policies which can prove that the *cascade* has taken place already. The *institutionalization* process can be said to have started. The norm has been spread through the discussion following the implementation of the norm (Kelley, 2008 p. 229-230) which is viewed in how the WEF or the The European Policy Centre argues. The *legitimacy* motive is present in both the Mission letters and the arguments made in the general discourse. The fact that these actors refer to the climate policies already implemented by the EC in their arguments further strengthen that notion. Von der Leyens' argumentation though, mentioning the financial gains if the EU are quick in implementing the new climate measures and acknowledging the children's future, seems to indicate that the norm has not yet cascaded fully, since that seems to be adhering to the *ideational commitment* of stage 1 in the life cycle. Since these arguments are mentioned in the introduction, they

should be seen as something Von der Leyen wants to emphasize. These arguments are more *persuasive* in their nature.

This triple position between the *three* first stages leads me to put the norm in a space that covers both the *Tipping point* and the *cascade*. To put the norm in the *cascade* stage seems motivated, but what seems to be a lingering *persuasion* still manifested in the introduction makes the placement of the norm more difficult. Albeit, since every prerequisite to place the norm in stage 2 and 3 are fulfilled I choose to put the norm in the middle of the life cycle:

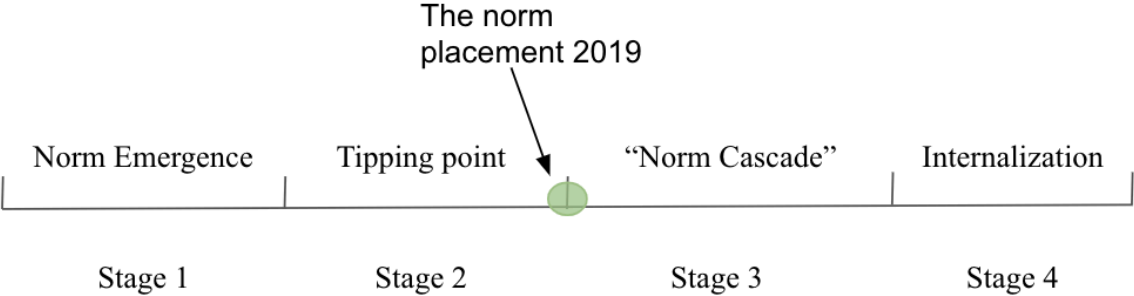


Figure 3

9.5.3 The climate discourse before the 2024 Mission Letters:

The emphasis on climate is visible throughout the Mission letters in both years. The argumentation for climate measures are also likewise both years. One particular characteristic though, can show us how the norms about climate have changed position on the life cycle of norms between the years of 2019 and 2024. The difference in the discussion about climate shows us that the norm has become *habitually institutionalised* in 2024 while it was only on its way to become that in 2019.

Opinion polls during the years between the Mission letters showed that a majority of the EU citizens regarded the problem of climate change as “very serious” and that they think that the EU are responsible in tackling these changes as well as accelerating the green transition

(European Union 3). The University of Cambridge, through their body “Corporate leaders group”, have created a toolkit that is supposed to be used for advocating for the European Green Deal (Corporate leaders group).

There has been critique directed towards the EGD. Roman Stöllinger and Michael Landesmann argue that the EGD is a good framework but that lack of support from the member states of the EU and the “too” ambitious goals will lead to that the EGD will fail with its mission. That does not mean that they are against the EGD, instead they propose strategies that the EC can use for improving its work (Landesmann & Stöllinger, 2020). Eastern European countries have complained that the established framework does not contribute the money needed to help coal regions and the green financial systems have been accused of being too easy to manipulate for malevolent actors to benefit from. Furthermore, critics have claimed that the EGD will make Europeans poorer, thus leading to a potential backlash against the EU (Harvey & Rankin, 2020).

The 2024 Mission letters also answered the problems formulated in the general discourse. A holistic view on climate policy is present in the 2024 mission letters, as it is in the 2019 Mission letters, but now Von der Leyen can adhere to the EGD. The work portfolios of the new commissioners is almost always described as being built upon the previous framework. She acknowledges that crises have demanded more extensive work but even then, she does not deviate from the focus on environmental issues. Quite the opposite, she further claims that Europe's dependency on others needs to be lowered and she even manages to connect AI to sustainable housebuilding.

9.5.4 Conclusion, the norm in the 2024 Mission letter and where to put it on its life cycle:

The 2024 Mission letters are built upon the foundation that many people in the EU accept and want the EC to handle the challenges that global warming presents. Furthermore, professionals and bureaucrats argue and help with, not only promoting and evolving the measures presented in the 2024 Mission letters, but even helping the EC with *measure-creating*. but even a highly regarded university, such as the University of Cambridge, has created a framework for how one argues in favor of the EGD has been created. The critique against the EGD stems from a standpoint that it is not doing enough, or that certain mechanisms are underdeveloped. When the *bureaucrats* of the EU and other

institutions are arguing about the EGD as being a self-explanatory part of the EC, the non-existence form of argumentation becomes proof of that it has become *internalized*. The norm can at this point be said to be part of a *habitual institutionalization*.

One can see that the climate policies of the EC has become part of almost every policy field and therefore should be acknowledged as being *internalized*. It is now the norm, that was argued for in the 2019 Mission letters and the general discourse before that, is *internalised* through the EGD and thus, the *measure-creating* aspect of the norm is fulfilled. One could claim that certain arguments are fulfilling other stages in the life cycle. The point of the Mission letters is not to *institutionalize* the norm. The general discourse shows that the norm is already *Habitually institutionalized*.

The placement of the norm becomes evident. It is situated on the last stage of the life cycle:

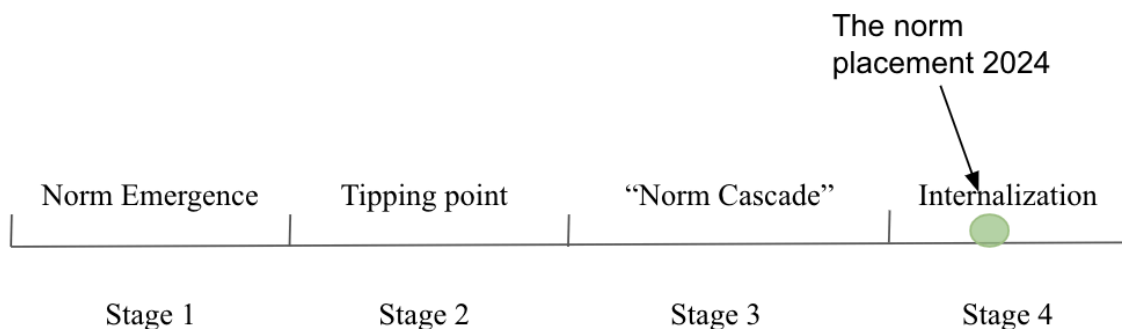


Figure 4

10. Conclusion:

My research question was “*Where, in the life-cycle of norms, is the norm that constitutes the climate policies of the European Commission?*”. That can be said to have been answered through my theoretical framework based mostly on Finnemore and Sikkinks research about norm evolution. Norm research is about finding norms, but also about navigating in the discourse that creates the norm (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998 p. 892). This analysis puts forward questions about the nature of norms and what it is that creates and forms them. As Björkdahl explains, a constructivist attributes ideational phenomena independent ontological

positions while at the same time accepting that causal mechanisms are at play when analysing ideational phenomena (Björkdahl, 2010 p.10). I have not only found a norm and given it my own name. I have placed the norm on a life cycle and thus, given it a life. This shows that the diminishing of ideational phenomena can lead to less understanding of what one seeks to examine. Further research should make way for the placement of norms on the life cycle. To deepen the understanding of what constitutes social reality can mean to deepen the understanding of contemporary political subjects and further explain why things are as they are.

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