

**Reviving the Dead?**  
**Bureaucratic Structure and the Persistence of Zombie IOs**

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**Abstract**

Why do some zombie international organizations (IOs)—those that persist in existence but deliver little output and fail to fulfill their founding missions—remain inactive and stagnant, while others manage to revive and regain functionality? This study argues that an IO’s bureaucratic structure, specifically its degree of organizational fragmentation and level of bureaucratic expertise, plays a critical role in shaping its trajectory after zombification. It proposes two key hypotheses: (1) higher fragmentation increases the likelihood of a zombie IO persisting, and (2) higher bureaucratic expertise increases the likelihood of a zombie IOs’ revival. To test this argument, the study develops a new dataset on IO vitality, encompassing organizations established between 1950 and 2014. It employs logistic regression to examine the effects of internal bureaucratic characteristics on revival outcomes. By focusing on internal dynamics, this research contributes to scholarship on IO resilience and reform, and offers practical insights for policymakers seeking to overcome institutional stagnation and enhance global governance.

## Introduction

International organizations (IOs) are widely regarded as essential tools for promoting international cooperation, but not all manage to sustain their effectiveness or relevance over time. Some institutions, despite retaining formal structures, become what scholars call zombie IOs—organizations that continue to exist but produce minimal output and fail to achieve their original goals (Gray 2018). While some of these zombie organizations manage to revive themselves, others remain trapped in this stagnant state.

A notable example of a zombie IO that was able to revive itself is the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), a North African trade organization established in 1988 to promote economic and political integration among Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia (Arab Maghreb Union). Just months after its creation, political unrest in Algeria and tensions between member states brought the organization's operations to a standstill. For nearly two decades, the AMU remained largely dormant due to ongoing political and economic tensions between member states (Zunes 1995). The organization's stagnation was broken in 2012, when it held its first summit in nearly two decades, signaling an effort to revive regional cooperation (Achy 2012). Since then, the AMU has re-emerged as a functioning IO, appointing a new Secretary-General and reestablishing basic institutional operations (Assad 2024).

In contrast, the Organization of Central American States (ODECA) is an example of a zombie IO that has remained zombified. Founded in 1951, ODECA was established to promote Central American unification and support economic, social, and cultural development among Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua (Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture). Despite its initial ambitions, ODECA struggled to assert influence and failed to resolve internal disputes, highlighting the organization's inability to maintain cohesion and marked its descent into a zombie state (U.S. Department of State). Although a new charter was signed in 1962 in an attempt to revitalize the organization, ODECA remains largely inactive with minimal regional influence, ultimately persisting as a nominal entity without achieving its original objectives (European Parliament).

Both the AMU and ODECA were established with the common goal of fostering regional political and economic cooperation, and both faced similar internal political and institutional challenges. While both attempted to revive after entering a zombie phase, only one succeeded in doing so. This contrast leads to a key empirical question: Why was the AMU able to recover, while ODECA was not? To explore this variation in post-zombification trajectories, this study addresses the central research question: Why do some zombie IOs remain stagnant, while others manage to revive and regain functionality?

Understanding why some IOs remain stagnant as zombies while others successfully revive is essential for creating more resilient and effective international institutions. By exploring the factors behind this divergence, we can pinpoint the conditions that trap zombie IOs in an ineffective, transitional state. Gaining this insight can help prevent organizations from enduring prolonged stagnation. Moreover, this research may identify strategies for revitalizing IOs that

have already entered a zombie state, offering pathways for their renewal and re-engagement in meaningful international cooperation. In turn, this work not only supports the survival of these institutions but also strengthens the broader system of global governance, ensuring that IOs are better prepared to tackle the challenges of the modern world.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows: It begins with a review of the existing literature on IO survival, institutional reform, and IO agency. While the IO survival literature offers valuable insights into how external shocks and internal features shape institutional endurance, it largely relies on a binary framework that overlooks organizations trapped in a zombie state. Although recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge zombie IOs, there remains a lack of systematic analysis explaining why some remain stagnant while others recover. Moreover, the institutional reform and IO agency literatures have yet to develop a clear framework for understanding the conditions that drive this post-zombification divergence.

The second section of this paper outlines its theoretical argument, asserting that an IO's bureaucratic structure—specifically its level of organizational fragmentation and bureaucratic expertise—plays a crucial role in determining whether it remains a zombie or achieves successful revival. These structural features influence both the coordination challenges the IO faces and its ability to develop and implement meaningful reforms.

The final section of this study presents an empirical analysis evaluating whether an IO's bureaucratic structure influences its likelihood of revival following zombification. Utilizing an original dataset on IO vitality, the analysis focuses on organizations founded between 1950 and 2014 that exhibited no formal activity for at least three consecutive years. These cases are categorized as alive, zombie, or dead using a newly developed IO Vitality Score (IOVS). The dataset, structured at the IO-year level, enables a logistic regression analysis to assess the impact of key bureaucratic variables on revival outcomes. The study concludes by discussing the broader implications for international cooperation and future research directions.

## **Literature Review**

### *IO Survival Literature*

The existing literature on IO survival develops its theoretical frameworks around two primary approaches to explain the factors contributing to an IO's collapse. One approach emphasizes external factors, such as withdrawals by member states (Borzyskowski and Vabulas 2019; 2022; 2024; Walter 2021) and exogenous shocks that accelerate the demise of IOs (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2018; 2020; Schuette 2023). The other approach focuses on the internal characteristics of IOs, including the size and quality of their bureaucracies (Gray 2018; Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Schuette 2023; Reinsberg 2024) and an IO's institutional design (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020; Dijkstra and Debre 2022), which help them endure despite challenges to their survival.

Although these studies provide empirically supported insights into IO survival, they rely on a binary framework that categorizes IOs as either fully functional or entirely defunct. This

binary distinction fails to account for an important intermediate category—zombie IOs that remain in a state of inertia, functioning minimally without being formally dissolved. As a result, the literature struggles to assess the frequency of IO dissolution, with scholars debating whether IOs frequently fail (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2020) or rarely undergo outright termination (Dijkstra and Debre 2022; Dijkstra et al. 2024). This gap is particularly significant for understanding IOs trapped in inertia, where survival does not necessarily equate to functionality.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond a binary understanding of IOs as simply alive or dead, recognizing that their vitality can fluctuate over time (Gray 2024). This perspective acknowledges that IOs can persist in a state of inertia as zombie organizations (Gray 2020; Dijkstra et al. 2024). While scholars recognize the existence of zombie IOs, they have yet to fully examine the conditions under which these organizations might regain effectiveness or transition back to functional entities. Additionally, the literature tends to focus on an IO's ability to attract talented staff and grant them autonomy, with higher levels of both associated with a greater likelihood of vitality. This approach overlooks how a bureaucracy's autonomy and expertise can lead to an IO's stagnation by reducing accountability, allowing it to continue functioning despite external demands for reform.

#### *Institutional Reform Literature*

To address the gap in the literature on IO survival, this study draws on insights from the institutional reform literature. The existing research on institutional reform is valuable to this study of zombie IOs, particularly in its exploration of who initiates reform—whether states are the primary actors or IOs themselves play a more significant role.

The principal-agent theory posits that a principal delegates authority to an agent to act on their behalf. In this framework, states are seen as the primary drivers of institutional reform. The principal-agent theory argues that any changes to an IO's mandate or structure are driven by state demands, as IOs are designed and empowered to serve the interests of the most powerful states, who maintain control over decision-making (Mearsheimer 1994; Graham & Serdaru 2020). From this perspective, IO survival depends on maintaining the support of dominant states. Without this support, IOs are unable to take significant action (Waltz 1979). While the principal-agent perspective offers valuable insights into IO design and change (Lipsy 2017), its state-centered focus creates a gap in the literature by emphasizing external factors shaping IO reform while overlooking IOs' potential agency. This limitation hinders a full understanding of how IOs themselves influence their survival and evolution.

#### *Institutional Agency Literature*

The institutional agency literature, in contrast, emphasizes the role of IOs as strategic actors with the capacity to drive institutional change. Existing scholarship often differentiates between IO leaders (Schuette 2021; Kille and Scully 2003; Hall and Woods 2018) and their bureaucracies (Barnett and Finnemore 2004; Gray 2018) when discussing IOs as strategic actors. For the purposes of this study, IOs as strategic actors will refer to both IO leaders and their bureaucracies. While this perspective recognizes that IOs are somewhat constrained by states, it argues that once an IO is established, it develops its own identity and pursues independent

objectives that go beyond its original state-given mandate (Barnett and Finnemore 1999; Barnett and Coleman 2005). Unlike principal-agent models that emphasize state-led reform, the institutional agency perspective argues that IOs may resist or shape reforms to prioritize their own survival and autonomy rather than reforming in order to advance the interests of powerful states (Hawkins et al. 2006).

Recent scholarship increasingly highlights the nuanced interplay between the principal-agent framework and an IO's ability to assert its autonomy (Kapur 2002). Rather than viewing this as a binary choice, emerging research on IO reform suggests that IOs often engage in strategic adaptation—modifying certain structures to align with the interests of powerful states while still preserving their core objectives and principles (Schuette 2021). One important limitation of this literature lies in its limited exploration of the conditions under which IOs successfully navigate this trade-off between adaptation and inaction. Specifically, the literature lacks a deeper understanding of how IOs prioritize certain principles over others during external contestation and the impact of these decisions on their overall legitimacy and survival.

While existing literature often overlooks the specific mechanisms through which IOs navigate the trade-off between adaptation and inaction, the perspective that IOs possess agency and actively shape their own evolution offers a more persuasive explanation for the persistence of zombie IOs than the principal-agent model. Instead of dissolving in response to challenges, IOs actively implement strategies to sustain themselves (Hanrieder 2015). Although these efforts extend an IO's lifespan, their primary focus on self-preservation can render them unresponsive to external demands, leading to inefficiency and self-defeating behavior (McCalla 1996). While much of the existing literature on IO bureaucracies primarily highlights their role in maintaining organizations (Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Schuette 2023) or shaping institutional design (Johnson and Urpelainen 2014), it often overlooks how bureaucratic dynamics can foster inefficiencies, entrench rigid institutional structures, or create resistance to meaningful reform. This study expands on existing literature by examining the influence of bureaucratic structure on IO outcomes after zombification.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

This study applies organizational theory to argue that an IO's bureaucratic structure is a key determinant of whether a zombie IO remains stagnant or regains functionality. Organizational theory is essential for this analysis because it provides a framework for analyzing how an IO's internal dynamics shape its ability to adapt or reform. It is important to note that this argument focuses solely on IOs that have become zombies, examining their potential for revival or continued stagnation, rather than the role of bureaucratic structure in their initial creation.

The argument that bureaucratic structure affects a zombie IO's potential for revitalization or continued stagnation centers on one key actor: IO bureaucracies. This study focuses on IO bureaucracies because it is their specific structural features that are of primary interest. While

member states establish the IO and define its initial mandates, it is the IO bureaucracies that interpret these mandates and influence the organization's development.

This argument is based on two key assumptions. First, this study assumes that IOs are autonomous entities, not just tools of state interests (Helfer 2006). If IOs were merely tools of state interests, then their persistence or revival would be entirely dependent on external political factors, such as state preferences or power dynamics. Assuming IO autonomy allows for the application of organizational theory to examine how internal factors—such as bureaucratic structure—contribute to their stagnation or revitalization.

Second, this study assumes that the autonomy of IOs enables bureaucrats to develop interests that may diverge from those of its member states (Hirschmann 2021). One such interest, crucial to explaining the variation seen in zombie institutions, is self-preservation. Bureaucrats are deeply invested in the survival of the IO, as its collapse would mean losing their positions as well as the subsequent loss of prestige. While member states may also have an interest in maintaining IOs, their jobs do not depend on the IO's existence, and so they are generally less concerned about its survival compared to IO bureaucrats.

This study argues that two specific aspects of an IO's bureaucratic structure influence whether it remains a zombie or undergoes revival: organizational fragmentation and bureaucratic expertise. It defines organizational fragmentation as the degree to which decision-making authority is dispersed or divided among multiple subunits within an organization, while bureaucratic expertise refers to an IO's ability to effectively manage its internal operations and implement reforms by leveraging the specialized knowledge of its bureaucrats to make informed decisions, respond to evolving conditions, and deliver high-quality outcomes.

#### *Organizational Fragmentation*

Organizational fragmentation plays a crucial role in determining whether a zombie IO persists or successfully revives, as it directly affects the severity of coordination challenges the organization encounters during reform efforts. This study characterizes highly fragmented IOs as those with authority dispersed across multiple, often semi-autonomous subunits—such as regional offices or specialized agencies—each possessing substantial decision-making independence. By contrast, less fragmented IOs feature centralized authority, typically located within a strong secretariat or a small core leadership body.

Greater organizational fragmentation exacerbates coordination challenges by hindering the alignment of interests within an IO. When numerous subunits possess independent decision-making authority, each develops and advances its own priorities, often competing for influence. As authority becomes increasingly dispersed across autonomous entities, reconciling these divergent interests grows more difficult—particularly during efforts to implement reform. Hanrieder (2015) highlights this dynamic in the case of the WHO, where regional offices have acquired substantial autonomy, enabling them to resist central oversight and impede reform initiatives. Without a cohesive decision-making structure, such fragmentation frequently leads to gridlock, as competing agendas stall or weaken reform efforts. This, in turn, undermines the IO's capacity to respond to global challenges and contributes to organizational inertia.

When a zombie IO operates with a highly fragmented bureaucratic structure, the lack of strong central coordination heightens the chances of its continued dysfunction. Fragmentation intensifies coordination difficulties, making it even more challenging for the IO to align the interests of its subunits, even in efforts to revive itself. Consequently, the IO is more likely to remain trapped in a state of dysfunction, unable to regain its effectiveness. In contrast, a zombie IO with a more centralized bureaucratic structure—where decision-making authority is concentrated in a powerful secretariat—faces fewer coordination problems due to the reduced number of competing interests between the IO and member states. This centralized structure helps mitigate coordination issues by facilitating streamlined decision-making, with a single authority exerting significant control over policy direction. This leads to the first hypothesis:

**H1:** Higher levels of fragmentation within a zombie IO increase the likelihood that it will remain in a zombie state.

It is also important to address whether the same factors that lead to IO fragmentation also contribute to an IO becoming a zombie. While fragmentation and zombification may appear to be linked, they stem from different sets of causal factors. Fragmentation often results from organizational design choices that emphasize representation, inclusivity, or regional autonomy, with the intent of ensuring that the interests of diverse members are adequately reflected in decision-making. On the other hand, the factors that contribute to an IO becoming a zombie are more closely tied to institutional dysfunction, agency slack, or failure to adapt to changing external conditions. These are distinct but interconnected processes—while fragmentation can increase the likelihood of dysfunction, it is the inability to reform or adapt that ultimately leads an IO into a zombie state.

#### *Bureaucratic Expertise*

The second bureaucratic factor influencing a zombie IO's trajectory is its level of expertise. An IO's ability to persist or revive often depends on how effectively its bureaucracy leverages technical knowledge to address emerging challenges. Bureaucratic expertise shapes outcomes through two key mechanisms

First, bureaucratic expertise enables bureaucrats within zombie IOs to better anticipate global shifts. Bureaucracies with deep expertise can identify emerging challenges early and diagnose internal weaknesses, allowing for timely adjustments. This proactive approach helps prevent the IO from sinking further into stagnation or remaining trapped in a zombie-like state. In contrast, IOs with weaker bureaucratic capacity struggle to detect problems early and adapt to external changes, increasing the risk of prolonged irrelevance and institutional paralysis.

Second, bureaucratic expertise influences an IO's strategic adaptation and institutional reform. Skilled bureaucrats can translate early warnings into concrete action by pushing for internal reforms and introducing new policies. Additionally, bureaucrats with deep informational expertise can leverage their knowledge to expand an IO's mandate, helping it stay relevant even if member states are reluctant to broaden its scope. By continuously refining its functions to

address emerging global challenges and mobilizing external support, a zombie IO with strong bureaucratic capacity can reclaim its functionality. Conversely, IOs with limited expertise are more likely to remain bound by outdated structures, lacking the knowledge to enact meaningful reforms and expand their mandates. This leads to a final hypothesis:

**H2:** Higher administrative expertise within a zombie IO increases the likelihood of its revival.

A key challenge in linking bureaucratic expertise to the revival or persistence of zombie IOs stems from the widespread characterization of such organizations as inherently lacking bureaucratic capacity. In other words, if an IO's decline into zombie status is attributed to low bureaucratic expertise, then what explains the emergence of sufficient expertise to enable revival?

The flaw in this argument is that it assumes that all zombie IOs fell into their zombie status because they had a weak bureaucracy. This critique mischaracterizes the argument by assuming that bureaucratic expertise must remain static over time. In reality, bureaucratic capacity is not a fixed attribute—it can develop, adapt, and reassert itself even after an IO has entered a period of dormancy. An IO may decline into zombie status for reasons unrelated to bureaucratic weakness, such as geopolitical shifts, membership fragmentation, or resource constraints. During this period, bureaucratic expertise may remain latent or underutilized rather than absent. Revival becomes possible when bureaucrats are able to reorient the IO's mission in response to shifting global dynamics.

Moreover, bureaucratic learning, leadership turnover, or strategic recruitment can all contribute to a renewal of expertise over time. In this view, it is not that bureaucratic expertise suddenly appears *after* decline, but rather that its influence becomes visible once conditions allow it to be mobilized effectively. The key point is that revival does not require a constant high level of bureaucratic capacity—it requires the presence of sufficient expertise at the right time, combined with internal willingness and external opportunity to act on it.

## Research Design

This study tests its argument using an original dataset on IO vitality. Rather than relying on Gray's (2018) dataset, which is limited to economic IOs, it constructs a new dataset to capture a broader range of IOs across diverse sectors. Building on Gray's definition of zombie IOs—institutions that continue to exist but deliver underwhelming outputs and fail to fulfill their core mandates—the study employs a two-step method to identify potential cases of zombification. First, it draws an initial sample from all IOs listed in the Correlates of War (COW) IGO Dataset (Pevehouse et al. 2019) between 1950 and 2014. This time frame is selected for the ease of operationalizing this study's independent variables. Within this sample, IOs that show no evidence of formal meetings or significant activity for at least three consecutive years are flagged as potential zombie IOs. Second, more specific coding—based on the IO's meeting

frequency, number of formal resolutions, and the degree to which these outputs align with the IO's stated mandate—is applied to classify IOs from this sample as zombies. As an additional robustness check, the study will apply the specific coding criteria independently, omitting the three-year inactivity threshold.

The unit of analysis for this study is the IO-year, beginning with the first year an IO meets the zombification criteria. The resulting dataset includes multiple yearly observations for each zombie IO. This study recognizes that the vitality of IOs can fluctuate, with some zombie IOs undergoing periods of revival before ultimately returning to stagnation. To address this, each transition from zombie to revival is treated as a distinct phase in the IO's lifecycle. The theoretical framework is then applied separately to each phase in order to ensure that the theory can be comprehensively tested and that the unique dynamics of each phase are captured.

#### *Operationalization of Vitality*

To accurately determine the stage of vitality an IO should be categorized into, this study introduces several innovations in variable construction. Building on prior literature, which identifies three distinct levels of institutional functionality—alive, zombie, and dead (Gray 2018)—these categories serve as the foundation for assessing IO vitality. Dead IOs are those that no longer convene and display no observable activity, existing in name only. Alive IOs meet at least once annually and show measurable progress toward fulfilling their mandates. Zombie IOs occupy a middle ground: they continue to operate in a limited fashion, such as holding occasional meetings, but generate little to no output aligned with their stated goals.

Distinguishing between alive and zombie IOs is crucial—although both may convene meetings, only alive IOs complement these gatherings with substantive, goal-driven activity. To systematically differentiate between the two, this study introduces the IO Vitality Score (IOVS), a composite measure built on three key indicators: (1) the frequency of meetings, (2) the annual number of formal resolutions or decisions, and (3) the extent to which these outputs align with the IO's mandate.

The first indicator assesses whether an IO is maintaining the essential function of convening its members. This is coded as a binary variable, where the IO is marked as 1 if it holds at least one meeting per year, and 0 if it does not. IOs that are coded as 0 are classified as dead. The second indicator quantifies the number of resolutions, declarations, or decisions produced annually. This is coded as a count variable, reflecting the IO's procedural productivity and indicating whether meetings result in tangible, actionable outcomes.

This study acknowledges that while some outputs may appear procedurally similar, they differ in how meaningfully they advance the IO's core purpose. Additionally, because this study examines IOs across different issue areas and functional mandates, it may be difficult to determine how effective or appropriate their outputs are using a universal benchmark. To address these issues, this study utilizes a third indicator that evaluates the extent to which the outputs identified in the second indicator align with the IO's stated mandate.

Before assessing alignment, IOs are grouped by mandate type (e.g., economic, security, environmental) to provide the contextual grounding necessary for evaluating outputs

appropriately. This grouping ensures that effectiveness is judged relative to each IO's functional purpose, avoiding misleading comparisons across fundamentally different organizations. Within each mandate group, tailored alignment criteria are developed based on the specific types of outputs that signify meaningful progress toward the IO's stated goals. For example, security organizations are assessed based on activities like peacekeeping deployments or conflict monitoring, whereas economic IOs are evaluated on trade agreements or regulatory harmonization. This issue-specific framework ensures that alignment is not assessed against a uniform benchmark but is instead grounded in the outputs most relevant to each IO's mandate, as derived from founding documents and strategic plans.

This method enables meaningful cross-organizational comparison while preserving the contextual sensitivity needed to evaluate output relevance. The degree of alignment is determined through expert coding, with researchers qualitatively analyzing the content and intent of IO outputs. Based on this assessment, outputs are classified as "aligned," "partially aligned," or "not aligned," and then numerically coded (aligned = 2, partially aligned = 1, not aligned = 0) to reflect their ordinal nature for inclusion in the composite IO Vitality Score.

It is important to recognize the concern that there may be little variation in how closely an IO's outputs align with its mandates, given the expectation that such outputs should naturally reflect the organization's founding goals. However, this study operates under the assumption that IO bureaucracies possess some autonomy, which can cause their outputs to deviate from their original mandates. Consequently, the study anticipates meaningful variation in how closely outputs align with mandates, thus positioning this variation as a useful and insightful measure of IO vitality.

Information for these indicators will be sourced primarily from the Yearbook of International Organizations (UIA), which provides detailed institutional profiles for over 70,000 organizations, including data on meeting frequency, documented outputs, and organizational mandates (Union of International Associations). Supplementary information may be drawn from IO websites, annual reports, and policy archives as needed for content coding and validation.

The vitality score for each IO-year is constructed by combining the three core indicators—meeting frequency, formal outputs, and relevance of outputs—into a single composite measure. Each component is weighted according to its significance for institutional vitality, with the alignment between an IO's outputs and its mandate receiving the highest weight, as it is the strongest indicator of an IO being alive rather than a zombie.

Following this, a threshold value will be established to differentiate between alive and zombie IOs. Organizations scoring below this threshold, even if they continue to convene regularly, will be classified as zombies due to their limited or non-mandate-related output. The threshold will be identified by examining the distribution of vitality scores across the IO sample and selecting a point where a meaningful separation becomes evident between IOs actively fulfilling their mandates and those exhibiting only minimal operational activity. Once determined, this cut-off will be used to categorize IOs, with scores above indicating active, mandate-aligned engagement, and scores below signaling stagnation. To enhance classification

accuracy, borderline cases will undergo manual review. As an additional robustness check, the study will explore alternative threshold levels to assess the sensitivity of the classification.

#### *Operationalization of Independent Variables*

This study's theoretical framework focuses on two key dimensions of bureaucratic structure: organizational fragmentation and bureaucratic expertise. To operationalize fragmentation, the analysis will rely on a textual examination of each zombie IO's founding charter. These documents typically outline the formal institutional structure, detailing the number and types of permanent bodies, their designated functions, and how decision-making authority is allocated. This study also acknowledges the distinction between fragmentation and organizational complexity due to size or functional delegation. Large IOs, such as the UN, may contain multiple organs or agencies, but this does not necessarily indicate fragmentation if the bodies are well-integrated and clearly coordinated toward a unified mandate. As such, the coding will take into account not just the number of bodies or subunits, but whether these entities are purposefully integrated with formal mechanisms for coordination.

Fragmentation will be assessed using four criteria. First, whether the IO has multiple distinct organizational bodies (scored as 1 if present). Second, whether these bodies operate under independent rather than shared mandates (scored as 1 if mandates are independent). Third, whether responsibilities are functionally divided among the bodies (scored as 1 if responsibilities are divided). Fourth, the absence of formal coordination mechanisms (scored as 1 if no such mechanisms exist). Each IO will receive one point for each condition associated with greater fragmentation, resulting in a total score ranging from 0 to 4. Higher scores indicate greater institutional fragmentation.

To operationalize bureaucratic expertise within IOs, this study codes individual-level data on the professional backgrounds of unit leaders across a range of institutions. Bureaucratic expertise is measured using two primary indicators: (1) educational credentials and (2) professional experience within IOs. For the education indicator, unit leaders are coded as 1 if they possess an advanced degree (Master's, PhD, or equivalent) in a field substantively aligned with the IO's mandate (e.g., public health for WHO, international law for the ICC), and 0 otherwise. For the professional experience indicator, an ordinal scale is employed to capture increasing levels of embedded expertise: 0 indicates no prior IO experience, 1 indicates at least one year of experience in any IO, and 2 indicates prior professional experience specifically within the zombie IO. These two indicators are combined to reflect both the depth of technical expertise and the level of organizational familiarity, with higher combined scores indicating greater bureaucratic capacity. Data for both indicators will be sourced from publicly available leadership biographies, CVs, and archival records, which serve as observable proxies for the underlying construct of bureaucratic expertise.

#### *Control Variables*

In order to ensure that the relationship between organizational fragmentation, bureaucratic expertise, and IO vitality is not confounded by other factors, this study controls for a number of variables that may obscure this relationship. First, this study controls for an IO's age

as older IOs might have established systems and a more robust institutional member that could affect their ability to revive or persist. Second, this study controls for the level of democracy among the IO's member states, as more democratic states may be more inclined to support the persistence or revitalization of an IO due to shared normative values, such as a commitment to international cooperation and institutional efficacy. Third, this study controls for whether an IO is political or technical in nature. Technical IOs are those that focus on specialized, non-political functions such as scientific collaboration, standard-setting, or humanitarian aid. These IOs may be more resilient to geopolitical shifts, whereas political IOs—whose agendas often reflect the priorities of dominant member states—may become obsolete if the international political context changes. Lastly, this study controls for the broader geopolitical context by including time-period fixed effects and dummy variables for major systemic shifts (i.e., the Cold War) that may influence an IO's likelihood of revival.

#### *Model Specification*

Due to the binary nature of the dependent variable—whether a zombie IO persists in its zombie state or successfully revives—the most appropriate statistical model to assess this relationship is a logistic regression. Logistic regression is well-suited for binary outcome variables, as it estimates the probability that a given IO revives as a function of key independent variables, such as organizational fragmentation and bureaucratic expertise. This method allows for the identification of factors that significantly increase or decrease the likelihood of revival while accounting for nonlinear relationships.

#### *Challenges*

A significant challenge in this study is ensuring the validity and consistency of the IOVS across various IOs. The subjectivity involved in coding "mandate relevance" could introduce bias and inconsistency, especially when dealing with ambiguous cases. Moreover, the subjective nature of the threshold used to differentiate between zombie and alive IOs could lead to misclassification of borderline cases. However, this study has taken the necessary steps to address these concerns by implementing a standardized and transparent coding process to minimize subjectivity. Clear guidelines for coding "mandate relevance" will be established, and multiple coders will be employed to assess inter-rater reliability to ensure consistency and reduce bias.

### **Conclusion**

This study has sought to explain why some zombie IOs remain stagnant, while others manage to revive and regain functionality. It argues that internal institutional features—specifically the bureaucratic structure of IOs—play a crucial role in determining whether an organization can recover from a zombie state. This study identifies two key dimensions of bureaucratic structure that are central to this process: the degree of organizational fragmentation and the level of bureaucratic expertise. These factors are empirically tested using an original dataset on IO vitality and logistic regression analysis.

Understanding why some IOs stagnate while others remain resilient is key to developing more effective international institutions. A deeper understanding of these dynamics can help prevent IOs from becoming mired in inactivity, thereby supporting broader international cooperation. Moreover, even when an IO enters a zombified state, this research may uncover strategies for revitalization. By drawing on insights from IO survival, reform, and agency, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how IOs operate, why some persist in stagnation, and what actions can be taken to enhance global governance.

As one of the first studies to directly examine zombie IOs, this paper makes several important contributions to the existing literature on IO survival and reform. While existing research has predominantly categorized IOs as either alive or dead, this study introduces a more nuanced approach by recognizing the dynamic nature of zombie IOs, offering a deeper understanding of IO vitality. It also makes a significant empirical contribution by developing a novel dataset on zombie IOs and introducing the IOVS metric to assess IO vitality.

From a policy perspective, this study recommends that IOs reinforce their internal bureaucratic structures to reduce the risk of prolonged stagnation. Improving both organizational cohesion and bureaucratic expertise increases the chances of revival by reducing coordination challenges and enhancing the IO's ability to adapt and reform. To strengthen cohesion, policymakers should clarify lines of authority, eliminate overlapping mandates, and streamline decision-making processes to improve efficiency. To build bureaucratic expertise, IO leaders should focus on recruiting technically skilled personnel with relevant experience and invest in continuous training and professional development to maintain institutional knowledge. Recognizing the critical role of internal dynamics in IO performance can guide more effective institutional reforms, helping IOs become more resilient and responsive in the long term.

This paper also paves the way for several promising avenues of future research on IOs, their bureaucratic dynamics, and long-term sustainability. A key direction for further study is the comparative analysis of bureaucratic fragmentation and expertise across various types of IOs. Disaggregating these types of IOs could provide insights into how bureaucratic characteristics influence each organization and impact their ability to adapt to changing political contexts and address emerging global challenges. Additionally, while this study examines IOs that have already fallen into a zombie state, another critical area for future research would be to investigate the causal mechanisms that contribute to an IO's initial descent into stagnation. Identifying these mechanisms would allow scholars to trace the early warning signs and risks that lead to the decline of IOs.

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