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# Projects for Europe: the projectification of society as a capacity for progress, renewal and engagement

Correspondence: Reinhard Wagner, Alma Mater Europaea University, Slovenska ulica 17, 2000 Maribor, Slovenia.  
E-mail: reinhard.wagner@almamater.si

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Reinhard Wagner, Mladen Radujković

Alma Mater Europaea University, Maribor, Slovenia

## ABSTRACT

Europe is confronted with technological, economic, environmental, geopolitical and societal challenges that demand more than policy intentions and established organisational routines. They demand the capacity to turn ideas into action and ambitions into tangible change. Projects have become one of the principal organisational forms through which such change is realised. This Academic Engagement/Perspective paper reflects on projectification from a European perspective and distinguishes three inter-related arenas: the private economy, where projects enable innovation, transformation and competitiveness; the public sector, where projects translate policies into infrastructure, reforms and public value; and society at large, where projects provide vehicles for civic engagement, arts, culture and collective action. Projectification is understood here as the increasing prevalence and societal embeddedness of projects and project practices. We distinguish it from project capability, meaning the ability to select, govern, resource, deliver and learn from projects. Evidence from Germany, Norway, Iceland, Croatia and Italy shows that projectification is substantial but not uniform. Our five-country research based on institutional logics further indicates markedly different trajectories even within Europe: Germany is characterised predominantly by a decentralised market- and profession-oriented logic, whereas Croatia displays a stronger supranational European Union governance logic. We therefore argue that projectification should be understood as a contextually embedded societal transformation rather than as a universal model. Europe does not simply need more projects; it needs project capabilities suited to different institutional settings and able to connect temporary initiatives with longer-term organisational and societal purposes.

**Key words:** projectification; project society; Europe; institutional logics; project capability; public sector; civil society.

## Europe needs the capacity to act

Europe faces an unusual concentration of transformations. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence are reshaping industries and professions. The energy transition requires major changes in infrastructure and production systems. Demographic developments affect labour markets and social security systems. Geopolitical tensions have returned questions of security, resilience and strategic autonomy to the centre of European policy. At the same time, Europe must strengthen its competitiveness while maintaining environmental ambitions, social cohesion and democratic values. The European Commission's Competitiveness

Compass captures much of this agenda through the imperatives of closing the innovation gap, decarbonising the economy, and reducing dependencies while increasing security (European Commission, 2025).

The underlying challenge is not simply a lack of ambitions, knowledge or institutions. Europe has strategies, legislation, scientific capability and substantial public and private resources. A recurrent difficulty is translating these resources and intentions into implementation. Strategies describe desired futures; institutions provide continuity and legitimacy; processes provide repetition and reliability. Projects create temporary settings in which something that does not yet exist can be conceived and realised. New products are developed through projects. Factories and infrastructure are built through projects. Digital systems are introduced through projects. Research programmes, cultural events, urban transformations, climate initiatives and humanitarian interventions are organised as projects.

In this paper, projectification refers to the increasing prevalence and societal embeddedness of projects and project practices. It can be observed quantitatively in the share of work organised as projects and qualitatively in the diffusion of temporary organising into organisational structures, professional practices, public governance and wider culture (Packendorff and Lindgren, 2014; Jacobsson and Jalocha, 2021). Projectification is therefore both an organisational trend and, in its broader form, a societal transformation.

We distinguish projectification from project capability. Project capability denotes the ability of organisations and societies to select, govern, resource, deliver and learn from projects. It is neither a synonym for projectification nor an automatic outcome of having more projects. Rather, it is a capacity required to make project-based activity productive, responsible and sustainable. A highly projectified setting can still have weak project capability, while strong project capability can help organisations avoid unnecessary or poorly governed project work.

As an Academic Engagement/Perspective contribution, this paper does not report a new empirical study or present a systematic literature review. Its purpose is to reflect on what our academic engagement with projectification at Alma Mater Europaea University, read alongside selected seminal and empirical research, may tell us about Europe's capacity to organise change. The discussion focuses on the private economy, the public sector and society at large, and uses institutional logics to explain why projectification takes different forms across national settings. The aim is interpretive rather than prescriptive: we seek to sharpen understanding of the phenomenon, not to offer a policy blueprint.

## From the projectification of firms to the projectification of society

The academic discussion on projectification initially emerged from the corporate world. Midler (1995) used the transformation of Renault to describe how projects gained importance within the firm and changed structures, responsibilities and ways of working. Research subsequently expanded towards project-oriented organisations, project-based industries and entire economies. Packendorff and Lindgren (2014) distinguish narrow interpretations of projectification, centred on the increasing prevalence of projects in organisational structures, from broader interpretations that consider cultural and discursive

changes throughout society. Lundin *et al.* (2015) describe a project society in which temporary organising increasingly interacts with traditional institutions.

The broader perspective is important because projects are no longer confined to professional project organisations. Jensen *et al.* (2016) interpret projects as a contemporary human condition: they structure work, networks, private activities and personal development. Jacobsson and Söderholm (2022) use the notion of Homo Projecticus to describe individuals who increasingly organise action through temporary endeavours. The earlier notion of the 'projective city' similarly portrays projects as temporary arrangements that activate networks and connect otherwise dispersed actors (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2018).

Institutional research adds a further dimension. Projects do not simply enter a neutral environment; they interact with established rules, norms, professions and expectations. Projects and institutions can mutually constitute one another: projects are shaped by institutional settings, while repeated project practices can also change those settings (Söderlund and Sydow, 2019). The rise of the 'project-state' and of projectified governance illustrates that temporary organising has become relevant to state capacity as well as corporate change (Maier, 2023; Munck af Rosenschöld, 2019). This institutional perspective helps explain why similar project practices produce different trajectories in different countries.

## A European pattern, but not a uniform logic

Empirical studies demonstrate that projectification has become substantial in several European economies. Schoper *et al.* (2018) measured projectification as the share of project work in total working time and found levels of 34.7% in Germany, 32.6% in Norway and 27.7% in Iceland. A replication approximately ten years later reported 34.5% for Germany, 41.9% for Norway and 34.4% for Iceland in 2022 (Wald *et al.*, 2025). Germany remained broadly stable, while Norway and Iceland increased considerably. Rather than suggesting unlimited growth, the replication points towards convergence at a high level and possible saturation in some settings. Projectification can therefore no longer be treated simply as an emerging management fashion; in substantial parts of Europe, it has become a structural feature of economic life.

Croatia presents a different trajectory. Radujković *et al.* (2021) found that project work accounted for roughly 27% of total working time, with construction and other sectors connected to public investment playing a prominent role. Public-sector projectification was comparatively strong, and European Union funding constituted an important stimulus. Italy provides another European case. A national survey involving 500 organisations estimated projectification at 33.7% in 2017 and expected further growth (Wagner, 2019). The Italian context also illustrates the importance of professional and regulatory arrangements: project management has developed through an entanglement of professional communities, standards and public regulation rather than through one single institutional route (Sabini and Paton, 2021).

These differences matter. Projectification is the visible organisational phenomenon; institutional logics help explain why it develops differently. Institutional logics are historically developed patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules that shape which actors are legitimate, how decisions are made and what forms of organising are considered appropriate

(Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Thornton *et al.*, 2013). Institutions can be regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive, and actors both reproduce and change them (Scott, 2014). Projectification is consequently embedded in national and sectoral institutions rather than unfolding according to a single universal model.

Our recent five-country research makes this particularly visible (Wagner, 2026). Based on literature analysis and approximately 20 qualitative interviews per country in Croatia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Peru and South Africa, the study compared the institutional logics of state, market, profession and community. The two European cases already reveal striking divergence. Croatia is characterised predominantly by a supranational EU governance logic: European regulation, cohesion and structural funding shape project activity, the public sector often acts as initiator and fund allocator, and project execution is comparatively rule- and reporting-oriented. Germany, by contrast, displays a stronger ordoliberal market and professional logic. Projectification is concentrated in private firms, especially the *Mittelstand*, and is driven more strongly by competitive pressure, self-organisation and professional associations than by direct state intervention.

The implication is important for Europe. European integration does not erase national institutional differences. The same European policies, funds or professional standards may be interpreted and enacted differently because they enter different institutional settings. There can therefore be no single European trajectory of projectification. Understanding projectification requires attention to the actors and institutional logics through which projects are initiated, legitimised and executed.

## The private economy: projects as vehicles of competitiveness and innovation

The private economy is the arena in which projectification is usually most mature. Firms organise repetitive activities through permanent functions such as production, procurement, finance or sales. Projects become important when organisations need to create something substantially new. New products, production technologies, digital platforms, artificial intelligence applications, factories, international expansions and business models typically cut across established organisational boundaries. They require different disciplines to collaborate temporarily under uncertainty towards an outcome that cannot simply be produced through routine operations.

For European companies, this capacity has gained strategic relevance. Competition increasingly depends on the speed with which organisations can convert technological possibilities, customer needs and regulatory change into working solutions. Projects provide an organisational architecture for doing so. Henning and Wald (2019) found predominantly positive macroeconomic effects of firm-level project work on production and innovativeness, employment and income, although effects vary across sectors. Their argument for ‘wiser projectification’ is therefore crucial: more projects are not automatically better projects.

Digital technologies are also changing project management itself. Recent research points to growing use of artificial intelligence for forecasting, risk analysis, scheduling, resource allocation, knowledge retrieval, documentation and decision support. At the same time, the evidence remains heterogeneous and the technology is evolving rapidly. Current literature emphasises augmentation of analysis and decision support, to-

gether with changes in task profiles and competence requirements, rather than a simple wholesale replacement of project managers (Müller *et al.*, 2024; Nenni *et al.*, 2025). In this perspective, AI is therefore treated as one technological driver affecting project work and project capability, not as a separate subject of investigation.

An organisation does not become competitive merely by declaring more activities to be projects. Projects must be selected strategically, staffed adequately, governed effectively and linked to permanent organisational capabilities. Excessive temporary organising can fragment knowledge, compete for scarce experts and consume coordination capacity. Institutional logics matter here as well. Germany’s market- and profession-oriented trajectory supports decentralised project work in companies and professional self-organisation, while more state-centered settings may locate transformation projects in public programmes or state-owned enterprises (Wagner, 2026). If innovation, digitalisation, decarbonisation and industrial renewal are central to European competitiveness, project capability becomes an economic capability - but the mechanisms for strengthening it remain context-dependent.

## The public sector: from policy ambition to implementation

The second arena is the public sector, where the projectification debate becomes more complex. Municipalities must modernise mobility, schools, housing, energy systems and digital services. National governments must implement infrastructure, defence, climate and transformation programmes. The European Union itself increasingly pursues policy objectives through programmes, missions, grants and time-bounded initiatives. Godenhjelm *et al.* (2015) showed how EU policies and funding mechanisms encourage project-based organising in public administration, while also identifying tensions between temporary project structures and permanent administrative institutions.

Projects offer public organisations focus, cross-functional collaboration and a way to mobilise expertise around complex change. Yet public projects operate under institutional logics that differ from those of private firms. Legality, democratic legitimacy, transparency, equal treatment and accountability cannot simply be replaced by speed or managerial discretion. Fred (2020) shows that projectification may coexist with, reproduce or even intensify bureaucratic practices. Munck af Rosenschöld (2019) likewise demonstrates that projectified governance can induce institutional change through different mechanisms rather than through one uniform model. Hodgson *et al.* (2019) describe the resulting ambivalence: projects can enable flexibility and innovation, but they can also create fragmentation, short-termism, reporting burdens and weak institutional learning.

Our own research on Germany highlighted the consequences of uneven projectification between sectors. Projectification is significantly more developed in the economy than in public administration, and this matters where public bodies must initiate, govern or participate in complex infrastructure projects (Wagner and Radujković, 2022). This research suggests that, in some settings, implementation difficulties may partly reflect gaps in the institutional capability to govern and deliver projects. We do not treat this as a general diagnosis of Europe; it is a proposition that requires further comparative investigation and should be read alongside the wider literature on public-sector projectification.

The comparison with Croatia demonstrates why public-sector capability cannot be strengthened everywhere in the same way. In Croatia, EU programmes and funding have stimulated projectification of the public sector and created intermediaries and administrative capabilities for programme and project delivery. In Germany, the state more often acts as framework-setter while project professionalism has developed through companies and professional associations (Wagner, 2026). In one setting, the challenge may be to reduce compliance-heavy project bureaucracy and strengthen outcome orientation; in another, it may be to professionalise sponsorship, portfolio governance and implementation capacity inside the administration itself.

Projectification of the public sector should therefore not mean mechanically importing corporate project management into government. The more relevant question is how public institutions can organise complex change while preserving legality, accountability and public value.

### **Society at large: projects as vehicles of participation, arts, culture and the common good**

The third arena extends projectification beyond companies and public administrations. Artists create projects. Universities organise research projects. Citizens form neighbourhood and climate initiatives. Associations conduct sports, cultural and environmental projects. Volunteers organise festivals, refugee support and community activities. Even private undertakings are increasingly framed as projects. In this wider societal arena, projects are not primarily justified by efficiency. They also become vehicles for agency: people can act together on something they consider worthwhile.

The cultural sector is especially revealing because project work is often processual, exploratory and open-ended rather than fully plan-driven. Research in the arts emphasises the future-oriented temporality of projects and their ability to create a protected space for experimentation, even where outcomes cannot be specified in advance (Bayly, 2013; Kunst, 2012; Sansi, 2020). Projects can connect temporary funding, artists, institutions, audiences and places without requiring the creation of a permanent organisation. Similar patterns appear in civic initiatives, volunteering, local development and social action.

This does not mean that projectification is automatically emancipatory. Temporary funding can create precarious work, repeated applications and discontinuity. Project-based civic action may privilege people who have the time, networks and competence to participate. The project society can therefore generate new inequalities as well as new opportunities. The important point is that project capability increasingly influences who is able to turn an idea into collective action.

There is a specifically European dimension to this. Europe is more than a political union or economic market. It is a historically developed space of cities, cultures, universities, associations and civic institutions. Cross-border research, cultural exchange, heritage initiatives, Erasmus activities, regional co-operation and countless local projects create connections that complement formal institutions. Europe is not built only through treaties and permanent organisations; it is continuously recreated through projects in which Europeans work together. In this sense, projectification becomes part of the infrastructure of participation, culture and the common good.

### **Academic engagement: exploring projectification from Maribor**

The preceding sections deliberately draw on a broad body of research. This section turns to our own academic engagement, because the purpose of this contribution is also to reflect on how our understanding of projectification has developed through work at Alma Mater Europaea University. Our engagement began from the observation that projectification research had remained strongly focused on businesses although projects were visibly spreading throughout society.

Together with Martina Huemann, we first shifted attention towards the institutional actors involved in this development. We examined how project management associations contribute to the projectification of society and found that these professional communities had historically concentrated much of their activity on the corporate sphere. We argued that societal challenges require them to widen their engagement beyond their traditional constituency (Wagner *et al.*, 2021). The subsequent empirical study of Germany extended this institutional perspective across different sectors of society. It showed that projectification was well advanced but unevenly distributed, with the economy taking a leading role and public administration, civic engagement, leisure, arts and culture displaying different levels of projectification (Wagner *et al.*, 2022).

Our work on infrastructure then focused on the consequences of lagging public-sector projectification, linking project performance with the institutional capability surrounding projects rather than treating delivery problems solely as failures of individual project management (Wagner and Radujković, 2022). More recently, we connected projectification with the professionalisation of project management. A comparative analysis of Germany and Kazakhstan showed that increasing projectification creates demand for professional project management, but that professionalisation follows divergent trajectories depending on institutional logics: a predominantly decentralised and profession-driven route in Germany contrasted with a more state-led route in Kazakhstan (Wagner and Radujković, 2025).

The five-country extension broadened this reasoning to Croatia, Germany, Kazakhstan, Peru and South Africa and confirmed that state, market, profession and community logics shape not only who drives projectification but also how projects are executed and what societal effects they produce (Wagner, 2026). This research trajectory has changed our own understanding of the phenomenon. Measuring the share of project work remains useful, but it is no longer sufficient. Projectification is best understood as a contextually embedded transformation whose meaning depends on the institutional setting in which projects are organised.

### **From more projects to a project-capable Europe**

The central implication of this perspective is not that Europe should maximise the number of projects. Projectification has limits and potentially negative consequences. Temporary organising can fragment organisations; multiple initiatives can compete for resources and attention; project workers can experience overload and discontinuity; knowledge can disappear when temporary structures dissolve. Deprojectification may even be a sen-

sible response when organisations have accumulated too many temporary initiatives or when stable routines would be more effective (Jacobsson and Jalocha, 2025).

There are also activities for which continuity matters more than temporariness. Courts, hospitals, schools, public administrations, utilities and companies require permanent capabilities. Long-term knowledge, trust, professional standards and democratic accountability cannot be recreated anew with every project. This is where the distinction introduced earlier becomes important: projectification describes the spread of project-based organising; project capability describes the ability to use that form of organising well. Strong project capability can include the judgement not to organise an activity as a project at all.

The following observations are therefore interpretive implications rather than policy recommendations. In the private economy, project capability concerns the translation of innovation and strategy into coherent portfolios of change. In the public sector, it concerns sponsorship, prioritisation, governance, cross-institutional collaboration and the integration of temporary results into permanent administrative structures. In civil society, arts and culture, it concerns enabling people and communities to mobilise resources and collaborate without imposing unnecessary managerialism.

Across all three arenas, institutional diversity matters. The lesson from institutional-logics research is not that context is an obstacle to best practice; context is part of the causal mechanism. What strengthens projectification in a market- and profession-oriented setting may not work in a state-led or EU-governance-oriented setting. Professional associations, universities, public bodies and civil-society organisations can act as intermediaries that translate project knowledge into forms suited to different institutional contexts.

Finally, project capability is also a human capability. Project-based societies require people who can structure ambiguous challenges, collaborate across disciplinary and organisational boundaries, make responsible decisions, use digital and AI-enabled tools critically, learn under uncertainty and connect temporary action with longer-term purpose. This shifts attention from project management as a specialist profession towards project capability as a broader societal competence.

## Conclusions: projects as a European capacity for progress

Over the past three decades, projectification research has travelled from the transformation of individual firms to economies, public institutions, culture, civil society and society at large. The evidence from Germany, Norway, Iceland, Croatia and Italy shows that project work accounts for a substantial share of economic and organisational activity. At the same time, differences between countries caution against interpreting projectification as a uniform European path. Institutional logics shape where projects emerge, who drives them, how they are governed and what effects they generate.

That insight is particularly relevant for Europe today. Innovation, decarbonisation, digital transformation, infrastructure renewal, resilience, security and social cohesion all require purposeful collective action. Projects are one important form through which such action is organised. The question is therefore not simply how projectified Europe is, but how projectification interacts with different institutional settings and whether the nec-

essary capabilities exist to turn temporary initiatives into meaningful and durable results.

Our academic engagement leads us to a deliberately modest conclusion. Projectification should neither be celebrated as an end in itself nor rejected as a managerial fashion. It is a widespread and institutionally embedded way of organising change. Understanding its different European trajectories - and the capabilities required to handle them responsibly - can contribute to a more realistic discussion of how Europe turns ambitions into action.

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