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Learning the ropes and embracing the rules: CFSP institutions as arenas for learning and strategic socialisation

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The aim of this article is to analyse those situations in which learning and socialisation take place within the context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), in particular, at the level of experts in the Council Working Groups. Learning can explain the institutional development of CFSP and changes in the foreign policies of the Member States. Some scope conditions for learning and channels of institutionalisation are identified. Socialisation, resulting from learning within a group, is perceived as a strategic action by reflective actors. National diplomats, once they arrive in Brussels, learn the new code of conduct of their Working Groups. They are embedded in two environments and faced with two logics: the European one in the Council and the national one in the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The empirical evidence supports the argument that neither rational nor sociological approaches alone can account for these processes.

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Introduction*

In the last decade, the CFSP has been subjected to an increasing institutionalisation which has facilitated two key processes: learning and socialisation. The CFSP literature lacks extensive empirical research on the occurrence and impact of these two factors particularly at the lower levels of the decision-making system. In order to address this gap, this article draws attention to the relevance of learning and socialisation and to the way in which they affect the policy process and the policy outcome. Learning appears as a key factor behind the institutional development of CFSP and can also help to understand adaptational changes in the foreign policies of the Member States. For its part, as a result of a particular type of learning –learning the procedural rules of a group–, socialisation in the Council Working Groups has an impact on the CFSP governance, and even on the policy outcome. The approach adopted here offers a new understanding of socialisation not as a passive process of adaptation to the rules of a group, but as a tool in the hands of self-reflecting actors.

Drawing on the existing rationalist/constructivist debate, this article calls into question the artificial division between rationalist and sociological approaches and in particular, how they conceptualise processes of learning and socialisation. These two cognitive processes have often been underestimated by realist and intergovernmentalist approaches. For the latter, changes in actors' behaviours are the result of changes in the international distribution of power or in material factors. In other words, they only refer to exogenous processes of interest construction. In contrast, it is argued here that social and institutional factors affecting individuals should be taken into account for a more comprehensive explanation of learning and socialisation, especially in the context of CFSP.¹ For example, as explained later, learning has been facilitated by the CFSP institutional setting. On the other hand, sociological accounts have overlooked the possibility of self-reflective actors using socialisation as part of their strategic calculations, i.e. strategic socialisation. For its part, the approach presented in this article adopts as a starting point the rational actor: even in highly institutionalised frameworks, rationality plays a crucial role in determining actors' behaviour. Actors are reflexive and take into account the social and normative context in which they find themselves when acting strategically. Therefore, neither rationalist nor sociological approaches alone can account for these processes. This article advocates instead a model which situates self-reflective actors within an institutional context.

The argument presented here also points to the specific nature of the second pillar as one the factors that may explain specific patterns of learning and socialization in this context. This unique nature can be summarized in the two following factors: the mix between the intergovernmental and 'Brusselised' decision-making process, and the significant role played by national representatives in the Council. This article also draws attention to the significance of the processes of learning and socialisation taking place at the level of the Working Groups and how they affect the policy process and the policy outcome.² Although the concept of 'high politics' might suggest that the decisions are mostly taken on high political levels, it is argued that the importance of experts' work on the lower levels should not be underestimated. A large

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¹ The theoretical framework privileged here draws on an institutionalist approach to offer a better understanding of how "institutions matter". For more on New Institutional approaches see Hall and Taylor, 1996; March and Olsen, 1989; and Peters, 1999.

² The role of the CFSP Council Working Groups is to discuss and draft CFSP documents such as Joint Actions, Council Conclusions or Action Plans. There are thirty-six permanent CFSP Working Groups that have been set following thematic (Transatlantic Relations, Non-Proliferation, Human Rights) or geographical lines (Western Balkans, EFTA, Latin America). With the development of ESDP, new Working Groups have been created such as the EU Military Committee Working Group. Apart from this, one can add two specialist Working Groups: the Nicolaidis Group and the Antici Group, in charge of preparing the agenda of the PSC and COREPER II, respectively. Finally, the RELEX Counsellors Group is in charge of ensuring horizontal co-ordination between CFSP and communitarian matters.

number of issues are resolved here, reaching the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER II) or the Political and Security Committee (PSC) in the form of already agreed consensus.

The article is divided into two sections. The first focuses on the process of learning. It begins with the conceptualisation of the term, distinguishing between simple/complex and individual/organisational learning. It then provides empirical evidence of learning in CFSP, pinpointing the facilitating conditions, as well as the channels through which it occurs. In the second part, the article focuses on strategic socialisation of national representatives to the Council Working Groups. This concept is explained and analysed in the context of CFSP. Certain informal rules of behaviour are identified, that form a code of conduct at the Working Group level. It addresses in particular the misunderstandings occurring between the diplomats in Brussels and in the capitals. Throughout the text the theoretical assumptions are supported by examples drawn from recent empirical research on the foreign policy of the EU and its Member States.³ It provides evidence to address recent academic debates on the nature and significance of learning and strategic socialisation, attempting to link theory to practice.

Learning in CFSP

A CFSP model which takes into account how actors learn from changes in their environments and from their own experiences can better account for the dynamics of CFSP policy-making. According to Ben Tonra, this enables us to formulate “a dynamic model of foreign policy and foreign policy change within the EU far richer than that available through strictly rational accounts” (2003: 736). Learning appears as an important mechanism explaining change at the CFSP level. It is facilitated by the CFSP institutional setting that prompts information-sharing, consultation and other communicative practices. In this section, after considering some definitional issues regarding learning -mainly, what is learning and the distinction between individual and organisational learning-, the article proceeds to explain which institutional mechanisms facilitate learning within the CFSP context.

Definition and types of learning

Jack Levy defines learning as “a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one’s beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observations and interpretation of experience” (1994: 283).⁴ Drawing on this definition, learning is conceived here as an active process which involves the following stages: 1) observation of your own experience or others’ experience; 2) an active interpretation of this new information; 3) a change of beliefs. The second stage is important because it allows for a distinction between learning and simple imitation or passive assimilation of new information. Learning involves a cognitive process of processing information through the lens of one’s previous worldviews that leads to a reassessment of prior beliefs. This active process of reassessment does not take place in the case of imitation or passive assimilation.

Learning always involves a *change* in the cognitive structure of actors. Thus, learning can lead to a) a change of beliefs or b) a change in the degree of confidence in one’s beliefs. In the latter, after processing new information about other actors’ policies, individuals may conclude that their model is the most appropriate in that specific situation, reaffirming their prior beliefs. In other words, after observing other actors’ models, the lesson drawn would be “how not to do things”, what Rose (1991) calls negative lesson-drawing. Positive lesson-drawing would instead mean learning about “how to do things”.

For the purpose of this article, learning is seen as a rational process. The concept of rationality used here is the one of bounded rationality. This hypothesis acknowledges the limited cognitive capacity of individuals. Thus, policy-makers do not dispose of all the necessary information to

³ The primary empirical evidence used in the article was gathered by both authors during their fieldwork in Brussels, Warsaw, London, Pristina and Sarajevo. This includes over 80 in-depth interviews with the national representatives from several Member States, EU officials and an on-line survey on Council Working Groups.

⁴ For a review of learning in foreign policy, see Levy, 1994: 280-282.

make the right choice. Moreover, their preferences may not be well-ordered or they are too complex. In this context, learning plays a crucial role. Actors can obtain new information related to their policy goals as well as information about their opponents' preferences during the informal and formal negotiations with other actors. Confronted with new information, individuals reassess their beliefs and, as a result of this, they may change, a) their strategies as they consider the new strategy to be the optimal to achieve their prior preferences or, b) their preferences, since they consider that the new goals will "better" satisfy their basic or fundamental interests.⁵

This article distinguishes between simple and complex learning (Stein, 1994: 171; Levy, 1994: 286). In the first case, as a result of new information and the processing/interpretation of this information, actors learn new *strategies* to better achieve their specific ends. Complex learning leads to a change in *beliefs* about the situation itself, the policy goals, or even to a re-definition of interests. However, complex learning is less likely to occur than simple learning, especially at the level of fundamental or basic interests.⁶ This type of learning is also more difficult to verify by empirical research.

It is important to note that learning does not always imply a policy change. Individual learning is considered as a crucial factor in explaining policy change,⁷ but to have this impact it needs to be institutionalised, i.e. transferred from the individual to the institution. Thus, organizational learning means "the institutionalization of individually learned lessons into organizational routines and procedures" (Levy, 1994: 311). Organizational learning proceeds in this way: "environmental feedback leads to individual learning, which leads to individual action to change organizational procedures, which leads to a change in organizational behavior, which leads to further feedback" (Levy: 288). Yet, individual learning does not always lead to organisational learning. Organisational learning then means more than individual learning by individual policy-makers since the process of institutionalisation can be interrupted at any stage stalling learning processes. For example, individual learning may take place, but then a change in personnel would prevent this learning being institutionalised in the routines of the organisation. Or, individuals stay, but they do not have enough institutional resources within the organisation to introduce changes. In contrast, it will be easier for actors that occupy strategic or top positions in an organisation to institutionalise the lessons they have learnt and hence, the importance of *who* learns (Bennet, 2004; Stein, 1994).

Scope conditions for learning in CFSP

Another question which arises from the discussion on learning is: when should we expect learning to occur in CFSP? Here some scope conditions for learning are identified in order to guide the empirical research:⁸

1. *Learning is more likely to occur when actors are in a new and/or uncertain environment.* For example, learning is more likely in periods of crisis or structural change. In these situations, individuals are "cognitively motivated to analyze new information" (Checkel, 2001: 562). This hypothesis of learning within a new and uncertain environment clearly applies to the case of the new Member States since they started to participate as active observers in the CFSP Working Groups. For instance, following from their participation in CFSP institutions, the new Member States have introduced changes in the structure of their MFAs.⁹ The national representatives learnt that instructions should be formulated not merely stating the national position, but "in a reactive manner" (reacting to developments in CFSP and when possible taking the initiative), and not in too radical terms. Participation in the meetings of the Council Working Groups also allowed them to identify the informal working procedures and the interplay among the different

⁵ It is assumed here that the policy preferences of the Member States are not fixed, but they can change as a result of the interactions within the CFSP framework, for instance, as a result of learning.

⁶ According to Tetlock's argument, one can distinguish different levels in foreign policy beliefs systems: tactical beliefs at the lower level, strategic beliefs at the medium level and fundamental beliefs and policy goals at the highest level (Tetlock in Levy, 1994: 286).

⁷ As discussed in the literature on policy convergence or policy transfer (Holzinger and Knill, 2005)

⁸ Adapted from Checkel (2001) and also from some rationalist literature on individual learning (Levy, 1994; Stein, 1994).

⁹ Interviews with national diplomats in Brussels, 2005.

Council bodies and how to use formal (COREU) and other informal channels of communication.¹⁰

The fact that the EU has only recently engaged in crisis management operations has also provided an opportunity to learn from these new experiences (learning by doing). For instance, EU officials have realised that better mechanisms of co-ordination were required among the civil and military actors on the ground in order to increase coherence and effectiveness. Learning gathered in several EU's crisis management exercises (CME) and operations has led to changes at the decision-making level with the creation of a Civ/Mil Cell within the General Secretariat's structures in order to better coordinate EU civilian and military crisis management operations and the draft of an EU Concept for Comprehensive Planning.¹¹ At the operational level, the first EU Police Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina provided the EU with a significant amount of information about how these types of missions could be improved in terms of coherence and effectiveness (Juncos, 2006).¹²

2. Learning is more likely to occur when the individuals have few prior, not strongly internalised beliefs. In this case, individuals are more receptive to new ideas and willing to change their prior beliefs (Checkel, 2001: 563; Levy: 1994: 302; Stein, 1994). This point was also confirmed by the interviews with national diplomats involved in CFSP working groups. For instance, those who had not dealt with the Balkans before arriving in Brussels acknowledged that they learnt a lot and that they did it very quickly. In contrast, those who had been dealing with the Balkan region at their national ministries mentioned that following from their participation in the CFSP Working Groups they had not learn anything or that it only confirmed their previous beliefs.¹³ However, more empirical evidence is needed regarding this condition.

3. Learning is more likely to occur from perceived failure than from success. Individuals are more willing to reassess their beliefs in situations of perceived failure. On the contrary, perceived success does not usually have an impact on prior beliefs.¹⁴ If objectives have been achieved, actors will not be motivated to change or reassess their previous beliefs, to learn from new information or from past experience. Therefore, success often leads to continuity, not to change (Levy, 1994: 305). Moreover, the incentive to learn will be even higher in cases of "unexpected" failure or success than when it was already anticipated by policy-makers.

Learning from failure has often been mentioned as a source of change in the EU's foreign policy. That was the case, for example, after the failure of the EU to prevent and to stop the conflict in the Former Yugoslavia. The experience was even more painful because it was unexpected by most EU leaders. Thus, at the beginning of the conflict, holding the EU Presidency, the Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jacques Poos stated "If one problem can be solved by the Europeans, it is the Yugoslav problem" (quoted in Nuttall, 2000: 200). One of the lessons of the Bosnian conflict was that "real wars" did not disappear from the continent and that they could erupt less than a two-hour flight from Brussels (Gnesotto, 1994). The CFSP, if worthy of its name one day, will not have to deal with direct threats to the EU's territory, but rather with peace-keeping and peace-management in its neighbouring areas. It took some years (and two more conflicts in the Balkans) to institutionalise the lessons, but the EU finally managed to, as the deployment of European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) missions in the Balkans show. According to Solana:

(t)he experience of the Balkans has been a sobering one for the European Union. But it has I believe also provided us with an opportunity (...) The Balkans has shown that the European Union can no longer remain a force for peace simply through example. It has also to be forthright in defending the basic values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law on which it is founded (Solana, 2000).

¹⁰ Interviews with national diplomats, Brussels, 2005.

¹¹ Interviews with Council Secretariat officials, April-November 2005.

¹² See for example, Council Secretariat and European Commission (2003), Council Secretariat (2003).

¹³ Interviews with national diplomats, Brussels, 2005.

¹⁴ However, on some occasions, it can serve to strengthen the degree of confidence in previous beliefs, which also constitutes a type of learning.

The same applies to the EU's reaction to the Iraq conflict. According to Everts and Keohane, "(t)he EU's handling of Iraq was an abysmal failure. But there are signs –including the Convention itself, Solana's security strategy and the latest developments in ESDP- that the Europeans are learning from that fiasco" (2003: 183).¹⁵

4. Institutional settings have an impact on the incidence of learning. Institutions can facilitate learning through specific institutional mechanisms (see below). Moreover, the type of institutional setting will determine the chances of learning taking place. *Learning is more likely to occur when the interactions take place in less politicised settings*, such as meetings of experts (Working Groups) than when interactions take place in high-level politicised settings (like the European Council or the Council of Ministers). In less politicised settings, actors are more willing to reassess their prior beliefs when confronted with new information. Moreover, at this level informal contacts and communicative practices are more frequent, setting the ground for learning. For example, some authors have pointed to how "epistemic communities", at the level of experts, can promote certain changes in policies and norms that were blocked at higher levels (Haas, 1992). As M.E. Smith (2003: 91) argued, it is an important factor that the European Political Cooperation (EPC), and later the CFSP, became institutionalised in a formal body composed of lower-level diplomats and technical experts, instead of senior officials, because the degree of cooperation can increase easily among these 'epistemic communities'. This increasing cooperation has facilitated learning.

Channels of learning in CFSP

CFSP institutions provide mechanisms that facilitate learning. For this reason, an institutionalist approach is particularly suitable to explain how learning takes place within the CFSP. For instance, repeated formal and informal meetings between the Member States, as well as the establishment of specific EU institutions like the Policy Unit or the Joint Situation Centre provide EU officials and Member States' representatives with information about policy consequences. Furthermore, during the negotiations taking place in the Council, the Member States' representatives have the opportunity to increase their knowledge about a specific issue thanks to the information provided by other Member States and EU actors (the Commission or the High Representative). According to Eising, "(d)uring these negotiations, the member states 'get the facts right' and acquire 'common knowledge'" (2002: 90). Confronted with this new information Member States' diplomats might be induced to re-assess their prior beliefs. In this way, learning from new information can lead to a change in prior beliefs or the development of new ones (Eising: 88).

For the purpose of this study, it is interesting to trace the channels of individual and organisational learning in the CFSP context. Channels of learning among the Member States representatives vary from transnational networks of experts and diplomats, to twinning programmes, or participation in formal negotiations at the EU level. On some occasions this learning can be the cause of policy transfer or institutional change, as in the case of changes in the structure of MFA of the new Member States (see above). New information obtained from interaction with others is an important source of learning, but the Member States can also learn from their own experience, in particular, from their own mistakes. For example, regarding the Polish officials learning how to prepare instructions for the Working Groups, a Polish official from the MFA declared: "it was learning on our own mistakes because nobody told us how to do it (...) It was our own experience".¹⁶

Processes of learning at the EU level –in other words, the EU's learning from its own foreign policy activities– may result from the evaluation of its own experience, as in the cases of Yugoslavia or Iraq. In addition to this, the EU also learns from the information gathered about the experiences of other international actors (UN, OSCE, US, its own Member States). New information is channelled by several EU institutions located in Brussels (like the Policy Unit or the Commission), or some CFSP institutions set in specific geographical areas like the EU

¹⁵ This point has also been confirmed by several interviewees, Brussels, 2005.

¹⁶ Interviews in Warsaw, May 2005.

Special Representatives or the EU Monitoring Mission.¹⁷ Usually, learning on the ground would be incorporated into the *Mission's Reviews* (EUSRs or ESDP Mission Reviews) or into the *Lesson Identified/Lessons Learned reports* (ESDP missions). These documents, which are written by experts on the ground, are then submitted to the Political and Security Committee (PSC), through the High Representative. Changes to current missions are decided at the PSC and approved at the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) taking into consideration these reports. In this way, learning becomes institutionalised. Yet, given the EU's limited intelligence gathering capacity, it is still extremely dependent on the information provided by the Member States.

In the CFSP context, it is also worth bearing in mind the distinction between individual and organisational learning presented before since on some occasions individual learning may not lead to policy change due to institutional and political obstacles. Crucial among these are the lack of resources to implement the lessons learned, the organisational culture, problems of internal communication or changes in the organisation's staff (high rotation levels mean that individual learning does not remain in the organisation once those individuals have left). These organisational factors might prevent the institutionalisation of learning at the CFSP level. For example, some Polish representatives learnt the importance of arranging informal meetings, outside of the negotiation room, often over lunch. Nonetheless, as they admit, lack of financial resources (representative funds) makes it difficult to put into practice.¹⁸ Other learned lessons included the need to speed up the decision-making process at the ministry level, to give more responsibility to lower level officials, to increase the capacity to formulate policy initiatives and to increase consultation with other European capitals. However, the characteristics of national ministries and their working cultures are still sometimes a constraint to introducing newly learned approaches, according to some national representatives in Brussels.¹⁹

To sum up, this section highlighted the relevance of learning in CFSP as a driving force for change. It also identified some scope conditions under which learning is more likely to occur. The analysis of the process of institutionalisation of learning at the CFSP level and of those factors that may stall such a process seems particularly relevant for further research. In the next section, the article moves on to analyse the second process identified earlier: strategic socialisation. Socialisation results from a specific type of learning: one occurring within a group. Arguably, in the case of CFSP, learning is an indispensable stage in the process of socialisation. This process matches the conditions outlined in the above section, in particular those concerning learning in the new environment and less politicised settings (conditions 1 and 4). First embedded into the national diplomatic environment, as soon as they start to participate in the Council meetings, national representatives learn a new code of conduct that they later use in a strategic way.

Strategic socialisation in CFSP

National foreign policy officials are now interconnected with their European partners, from the process of formulating positions and exchanging information, to agreeing on common collective responses. This is done in Brussels, at a lower level, through a network of national representatives, remaining in close and regular contact with each other. The process of socialisation can be observed in the emergence of a friendly, informal atmosphere which is complemented by the consensus seeking rule and keeping everyone on-board. The main aim of this section is to give an insight to the occurrence of socialisation in CFSP by providing empirical evidence. Emphasis is placed on explaining how socialisation is used in a strategic way.

This section also draws attention to the peculiarity of the situation of national representatives to the Working Groups, which lies in their association with two environments: the national one

¹⁷ In these cases, it is of particular interest the links between the implementation and the decision-making levels or how learning on the ground is institutionalised and incorporated into new decisions, improving EU's coherence and effectiveness.

¹⁸ This view was expressed by few interviewees, Brussels, 2005.

¹⁹ Interviews in Brussels, 2005.

(MFA) and the European one (the Council). CFSP is perceived as an intergovernmental policy and, hence, diplomats are expected in their capitals to represent national interest and bargain for the best possible outcome. However, once they arrive in Brussels, they begin to adapt their behaviour to the rules of the group they attend (the code of conduct), as part of a strategy to achieve optimal outcomes for their country, but that is also in line with the consensus within the group. Reflecting on their own behaviour, however, they do not see themselves as 'going native'. Nonetheless, tensions soon arise with their capitals.

Conceptualising socialisation

Socialisation has been analysed by social scientists as a "process by which social interaction leads novices to endorse expected ways of thinking, feeling and acting" (Johnston, 2001: 493). For the purpose of this study, it is defined as adaptation of certain rules of behaviour, 'ways of doing things', stemming from interaction with members of the same group. This process results in the establishment of a 'we-feeling' among the policy-makers and may lead to emergence of a common 'role identity' (Deutsch, 1957: 5-7). Nonetheless, according to the literature, actors do not change their behaviours and views the moment they enter into the new environment or group (Beyers, 2002). Instead, they start a process of learning the group's rules and simultaneously participate in the group's dynamics and legitimisation of appropriate behaviours. Therefore, socialisation does not imply internalisation of the behavioural rules at its first stage. Only later, this process may result in the internalisation of the code of conduct. Such internalisation means 'taken for grantedness', so that the values and rules, "are not only hard to change, but that the benefits of behaviour are calculated in abstract social terms rather than concrete consequential terms" (Johnston, 2001: 495).

Before internalisation occurs, socialisation may be better perceived as a strategic action undertaken by actors, pursuing their interests and resulting from rational cost-benefit calculations. This will be referred to in the article as '*strategic socialisation*'. Sociological accounts of socialisation have underestimated the strategic use of norms and practices (Schimmelfennig, 2000: 135). The actors' motivation to follow social pressures stems from the desire to maintain or improve their position within the group, as part of their long-term interest calculation. Legitimacy and reputation, factors contributing to actor's status in a group, become highly appreciated as they improve the chances of getting the national interest reflected in the policy outcome. The credibility of the actor is particularly important in the case of iterated negotiations, such as those taking place in the EU, where frequent and repetitive contacts with the same group of officials occur. Such conceptualisation of socialisation does not exclude that in the long-term, especially when actors remain in the same group for long time periods, the behavioural rules become naturally done things (internalised).

In the context of CFSP, this strategic behaviour is possible because national diplomats seconded to Brussels are not just shaped by the structure, but they are also reactive and 'self-reflective'. This means that they are able to interpret their own behaviour in the social context (Glarbo, 1999: 648). In the case of CFSP, where arguably evidence of internationalisation of norms is still lacking, compliance with 'cognitive scripts' can be explained by the strategic factors: long-term perspective of the negotiations and reputation. The article now turns to analyse socialisation as it occurs in CFSP, especially on the level of Working Groups.

Socialising diplomats: linking theory with CFSP practice

National representatives attending the meetings of the CFSP institutions have been "exposed to a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding" (Beyers, 2002) that some called *esprit de corps*. For his part, Tonra (2001: 261) asserts that even though there is no evident 'European' policy identity, there is already a "basic commitment and belief in joint policy-making". A national representative, referring to the *esprit de corps*, claimed: "It does exist. People just know each other privately, invite each other for the meetings, also on private grounds, discuss various issues and some kind of community emerges... lets call it community of thinking or community of common views".²⁰ Arguably, the club-like atmosphere, specific to foreign policy-making, still

²⁰ As another representative claimed: "There is a kind of family atmosphere in a group, I probably spend more time with my group colleagues than with the other representatives from my country". (Interviews in Brussels, February and July 2005).

exists nowadays, after the recent EU enlargement. Despite often expressed doubts, whether this *esprit de corps* would continue when more actors take a seat around the table, some practitioners claim that the informal cooperation has increased after the enlargement. One of them stated: “As there are now 25 states in the room, more is done outside, drafting is often done informally”²¹ and in a similar tone, another one asserted: “The enlargement process has strengthened the tendency to make all major decisions outside the formal meetings”.²²

Informal consultations prior to the meeting are part of every-day work of the representatives, as “many issues appear ‘pre-cooked’ in the agenda, especially the sensitive ones”²³. Representatives of some Working Groups often attend numerous meetings of informal, so-called ‘like-minded’ groups, based on similar interests on certain issues. These groups operate on a very informal basis and usually the participants credit each other with trust. An example of this may serve an incident, when a higher-ranked diplomat was denied access to the group, on the grounds that it would “infringe the group’s intimacy”.²⁴ One of the results of this ‘diplomatic intersubjectivity’ has been the emergence of a common code of conducting foreign policy (Glarbo, 1999: 645). Both, the literature and our recent empirical study on several external relations Working Groups point to the existence and importance of such informal codes of practices:

I. Consultation or coordination reflex. A process of information sharing, before any decisions are taken and often even before the formal national position is formulated, provides the basis for the national officials’ work. The coordination reflex is perceptible in the increase communicative practices among the CFSP officials. These practices take place through formal channels, such as COREU or mailing lists of the Working Groups. Nonetheless, a large bulk of information-sharing is informal and occurs in the corridors and “over lunch”. As one representative expressed it: “I am trying to meet my colleagues on a frequent basis: during the group formal meetings, but also before and afterwards, during lunches and any other gatherings”.²⁵ The representatives remain in close contact through e-mails, mobile phones and frequent meetings, either bilateral or within “informal” coalition groups. As one of the diplomats has recently put it: “If you don’t exchange information, you are nobody”.²⁶ European states no longer feel threatened by sharing information with their European colleagues. On the contrary, they have multiplied their mutual exchanges. Some of them admit they even share selected sensitive information with their counterparts, in particular if it helps to reach a compromise. Such information includes for example circulating national instructions, security assessments or other political information on a strategic level.²⁷

This coordination reflex also implies a tendency to take others’ views into account when formulating national positions (instructions). Many foreign policy-makers and CFSP officials acknowledged the fact that it became a ‘natural’ reflex, meaning taking into consideration what would be acceptable for their European partners, rather than simply what the national position, based on national interest would be. According to a practitioner: “... where there is ever any new foreign policy initiative in the making, the first reflex is European. The question is now what will our European partners say – what is the opinion in Europe” (Tonra, 2001: 261). Significantly, the reflex coordination appears as a ‘habit’, a naturally ‘done thing’, in contrast with rational calculations to pursue self-interested preferences.

II. A consensus building practice. CFSP is a subject of intergovernmental bargaining with states retaining their veto powers (with few exceptions) and for this reason it is a general practice to “keep everyone on-board”. Officials emphasize the “habit of thinking in terms of consensus” (as

²¹ Interviews in Brussels, 2005.

²² On-line survey on Council Working Groups, 2005/2006. New Member States have quickly learnt the importance of informal contacts between the experts at Working Group level. As stated by an official of the Polish MFA: “We are learning some procedures. I am not talking about the formal aspects, because these are relatively easy to grasp. I am rather thinking of the skills to build informal coalitions, agreeing on positions in the corridors, in the early stage, in order to avoid clashes later on. The British are the best example”. (Interview in Warsaw, 2005)

²³ On-line survey on Council Working Groups, 2005/2006.

²⁴ Interviews in Brussels, 2005.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ On-line survey on Council Working Groups, 2005/2006.

quoted in Tonra, 2001: 261). The Member States' diplomats try to generate a broad agreement regarding the decision, so no Member State is excluded (decisions by QMV) or auto-excluded (resorting to constructive abstention). The objective is to avoid isolation of any Member State's position in the decision-making process, as well as taking any decision that could damage the interest of a single country or a group of countries (Laffan, 2001). It is a two-way process because not only will the majority try to integrate the minority, but also the potentially isolated state will try to find supporters, instead of behaving unilaterally.

Effectiveness, understood by national diplomats in terms of reaching an agreement, is highly appreciated and, as asserted by one practitioner, "whoever is a troublemaker causes disapproval".²⁸ The national representatives often have a common interest in producing results at the end of the day. It is not rare that at the final stages of a long meeting the pressure stemming from the group and the Presidency is high for reaching agreement and not leaving any unsolved problem to be passed on to a higher political level. As stated by a diplomat "there is always a pressure to get an agreement, if you don't get a result, you have nothing. (...) we have to achieve meaningful results, a result in substance".²⁹

Maintaining 'positive' relations with other representatives and trying to avoid direct clashes of positions in the forum of the Working Group are among the main informal practices. A practice widely adopted by Belgian representatives is: "do what you think is appropriate, but try to improve European decision-making, do not make enemies and ensure that you have a positive working relationship with everyone" (as quoted in Beyers, 2002). Similarly, it is in good practice to seriously consider Commission's proposals as well as the deals proposed by the presidency.

III. Other codes of conduct. Another principle is the existence of *domaines réservés*. These are issues that cannot be submitted to discussion and interference from the other Member States. Traditionally, these areas covered security issues (national defence, borders, nuclear status or neutrality) and special relationships. For example, a diplomat from the Working Group on Western Balkans listed the transatlantic relations as "a sensitive issue" that would not usually be raised during the meetings. On the other hand, a member of a group dealing with transatlantic relations pointed out that any politically "hot" matters in EU-US relations, such as Iraq, were always kept out of the discussions.³⁰

There are also more detailed rules of behaviour and often their breaching is perceived by others as "inappropriate", leading to a decrease in one's credibility in the group. These are the rules referring to the manner of presenting instructions, courtesy towards other group members or the language used. They include, for example:

- No contradicting the position taken before on a higher level in the Working Group, not opening the issues previously closed in a Working Group on a higher political forum and definitely not contradicting the positions on different forums. As one of the representatives put it: "It should not be that the representative says nothing in the Working Group, because he is asleep and then it comes out on a higher level – this is a clear breach of procedures! This could just happen in extreme circumstances".³¹
- When instructions are considered by the representative to be "difficult to justify" within the group, they would usually resort to the phrase "according to my instructions..." or "according to my capital..."³². This is an *informal sign* to other group members, contrary to beginning your contribution with "We think...".

IV. Legitimacy, credibility and interactions with the capitals. National representatives learn the 'code of conduct' and apply it in their everyday work. As mentioned above, it is often a *strategic* action, aimed at strengthening one's position in the group and raising the chances of success in the future. From this perspective, adoption of the group's rules is a tactical move, a sort of negotiation strategy, employed in order to achieve their goals and not because it is "the right

²⁸ Interviews in Brussels, 2005.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ On-line survey on Council Working Groups, 2005/2006.

³¹ Interviews in Brussels, 2005.

³² Several confidential interviews in Brussels confirmed that practice.

thing to do". It is due to the fact, that legitimacy and credibility within the group are high at stake among the national representatives in the Council. As claimed by one of them, "credibility is something you gain if you are constructive in the discussions"³³. One diplomat referred to two types of credibility in the Council: both personal and country's credibility. Independently from the state's credibility, once the position of the diplomat within the group is strong, it is generally perceived easier to negotiate and make one's voice heard. Eventually, for the practitioners, it all comes down to "having your amendments approved", which is a sign that your strategy works.³⁴ Breaking the code, especially by forcing a position that is very radical or simply 'unforceable' is badly perceived by other group members. Hence, "later on, whatever you say, even if these are the best ideas, they are ignored in silence... That is why I have to build my position, everyone has to know I am pragmatic and ready to negotiate".³⁵ The representatives take into account the long-term results of the negotiations and are sometimes ready to make minimal concessions in their national short-term preferences, should it improve their overall standing within the group and increase the chances of success in more important issues.

Nonetheless, a crucial question to be asked regards the position that they want to achieve. Is the original national position or has it been modified by their interactions in Brussels? The representatives emphasise the difference between the perceptions of officials in Brussels and those in the capital, which occasionally leads to discussion over the instructions or convincing the capital that the instructions should be changed for the sake of the state's credibility in the group. In such cases they argue that the national position is not "quite in tune with the negotiating atmosphere here in Brussels".³⁶ In this way, national diplomats are able to use their expertise and institutional position to influence not only European politics and decision making, but also their foreign ministries (Spence, 2002: 33).

This tension experienced by the national representatives is due to the fact that they are embedded in two social environments: domestic and European (Beyers, 2002). The latter is learnt after their arrival in Brussels and the first one is subsequently modified. The diplomats sometimes act as 'change agents' in relation to their own national administration. The process starts during their stay abroad, but the influence can be exerted even stronger after their return to the capitals (the so called 'contagion' effect; see Page and Wouters, 1995: 197). In this way, they may take an active part in the process of Europeanisation of national foreign policies in both directions: national adaptation and promoting national policy goals on the European level. Those capital officials that spent even a few weeks training in Brussels claimed that it allowed them to see the work of their colleagues from different perspective and to understand better what was expected from the capital. Those that left the capitals and started working in Brussels felt the growing gap between themselves and their colleagues from the ministry. One of them observed that in Brussels "everything changes faster, when it comes to the mentality of the diplomats" and that the people in the capital "become frustrated, as they feel that we are getting further away and then the lack of understanding appears".³⁷

This final part of the article illustrated the tension between these two, often conflicting, behavioural logics: the national and the EU one. They are reflected in the misunderstandings between strategic actors, exposed to a new environment and processes of socialisation on one side and their colleagues in the capitals on the other. The most interesting aspect is that these two logics are working simultaneously in the case of national representatives in the CFSP Working Groups.

Concluding remarks

The aim of this article was to demonstrate on the recent empirical findings that the processes of socialisation and learning occur in CFSP and how they can be utilised to explain some important aspects of the decision-making process and the policy substance. The institutional design of the CFSP provides fertile grounds for these cognitive processes to occur. Both

³³ Interviews in Brussels, 2005.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

learning and socialisation are conceived here as being rational, undertaken by strategic actors who are influenced by their social environment. Individual learning is important as a precondition for organisational learning. The core of the research should focus on the process of institutionalisation of this learning in the CFSP context and on the factors that may hinder it. More research providing empirical evidence on the conditions established earlier in order to verify or falsify them will help to increase our understanding about when and under which conditions learning is likely to occur in the context of CFSP/ESDP.

It was argued throughout the article, that learning and strategic socialisation are intertwined together. Actors begin their socialisation by learning the group rules and then use them in a strategic way in order to achieve their preferences. The inclusion of both processes in the analysis of European foreign policy allows for a better understanding of how change and decisions take place at the EU level, but also at the national level (i.e. explaining the process of Europeanisation of national foreign policy).

The empirical findings supporting this article point at the unsuitability of the existing, somewhat artificial division, between rational and sociological approaches. Such a division limits the range of explanatory variables available to make sense of CFSP dynamics. For example, rational choice accounts conceive learning in individualistic terms where the social context does not have any impact. According to the empirical evidence gathered by this research, the institutional and social context have an impact on learning (scope condition 4). On the other hand, sociological accounts tend to underestimate the possibility of self-reflective actors using socialisation as part of their strategic calculations. Empirical evidence from CFSP shows that the behaviour of actors does not strictly fall into any of the categories established in the literature (rationalist/sociological). The approach adopted here intends to go beyond the strict division between them.

Finally, the specific institutional setting of CFSP, being a mixture between intergovernmental and communitarian arrangements, highlighted the role of actors embedded in two environments. National diplomats, being at the cross-roads of these two settings, constitute a focal point of this study. The CFSP literature has to a large extent neglected the tension that arises between the new behavioural logic learned by national diplomats from its participation in the Council Working Groups, and the behavioural logic in which they were fully embedded before (the national one). These two logics are not always in line. This situation allows the national diplomats to play a role of change agents in their national policies. Even though they perceive themselves as “national champions” of the positions from their capitals, arguably, as a consequence of an undergoing process of socialisation within the Council, their actions are constrained. Hence, they cannot easily be conceived as being fully rational or ‘unintentional’. In the case of CFSP we rather have to think of a spectrum between the two, on which the actions may be positioned. In sum, the article could serve as a starting point for a new research agenda that should start questioning the conception of what it means to be strategic and in which way rationality changes as a result of participation in CFSP.

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