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The Language Diplomats Speak: A Discourse-theoretical Approach to the Negotiations in the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly

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About the Author

Thomas Jacobs holds MAs in History (Ghent University) and in EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies (College of Europe, Bruges). He is currently pursuing a PhD in political science that analyses the way Members of the European Parliament communicate about international trade. He previously worked as Public Affairs expert at a Brussels-based communication consultancy. His main research interests include political communication, political radicalism, Discourse Theory and social constructivism. This paper is based on his Master's thesis, which he wrote while benefitting from an ENP-EU scholarship at the College of Europe and which was awarded the ENP award for the best thesis on the European Neighbourhood Policy (Chopin Promotion).

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Abstract

Although it is widely accepted that the study of diplomatic negotiations ought to be a multi-disciplinary enterprise, the field's state of the art does not reflect this need for diversity. Game-theoretical and socio-psychological analyses make up the lion's share of the research. In contrast, interactions between negotiators, perhaps the most elementary building blocks of negotiations, have received relatively little scholarly attention. This paper inquires how matters of language, communication and discourse can be brought to the front in the study of diplomatic negotiations. It will address this question on a theoretical level, by asking what theoretical preconditions to a discursive and language-based approach to diplomatic negotiations exist, and on an empirical level, by developing a relevant case study demonstrating the potential of this approach. With regards to the first question, it will be argued that Discourse Theory is well-suited to overcome the obstacles that have prevented a focus on communication from taking root so far. The case study will be drawn from the European Neighbourhood Policy and look at the discursive conceptualization of institutional relations, bureaucratic infrastructure and socialization efforts in the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly.

Introduction

In order to gain a good understanding of diplomatic negotiations, observation from multiple perspectives is necessary. That is precisely what Meerts meant when he argued that only “by approaching them from as many different angles as possible can negotiation processes truly be grasped”.¹ This need for multi-disciplinarity is only partially reflected in the scholarly literature on diplomatic negotiations. A few theories have historically dominated the study of diplomacy and continue to do so. Strategic, game-theoretical and various socio-psychological approaches in particular come to mind.² Yet, while their contributions to the knowledge of diplomatic negotiations are beyond questioning, they may – given their long tradition – perhaps no longer hold the innovative capacity they once had.³ At the same time, several other approaches to the study of diplomacy have not yet realized their full potential, as they have only been employed sparsely. The resources of language, discourse and communication studies, in particular, are remarkably underused in the study of diplomatic negotiations.⁴ While language-focused methods have been occasionally used to analyse bargaining and haggling in everyday situations, scholars studying more formal negotiations in the international sphere have rarely utilized them, and most scholars who did so are by training linguists or discourse analysts, not specialists of negotiations *per se*.⁵

The objective of this paper is to show that an approach focusing on language use can indeed be worthwhile in the study of diplomatic negotiations. In order to do this, two issues need to be addressed: what would such an approach look like (a theoretical question) and why is it beneficial (an empirical question)? The theoretical question

¹ P. Meerts, *Diplomatic Negotiations: Essence and Evolution*, Clingendael, The Hague, 2015, p. 19.

² For introductions, see W. Siebe, “Game Theory”, in V. Kremenyuk (ed.), *International Negotiation: Analysis, Approaches, Issues*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1991, pp. 180–202; J. Rubin, “Psychological Approach”, in V. Kremenyuk (ed.), *International Negotiation: Analysis, Approaches, Issues*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1991, pp. 216–288.

³ J. Sterling-Folker, “All Hail To the Chief: Liberal IR Theory In the New World Order”, *International Studies Perspectives*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 40–49; M. Mandel, “A Nobel Letdown in Economics”, *Bloomberg*, 11 October 2005.

⁴ V. Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism: Understanding Policy in Context”, in F. Fischer and M. Orsini, *Handbook of Critical Policy Studies*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015, pp. 171–189; V. Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse”, *Political Science*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2008, pp. 303–326.

⁵ L. Putnam, “Dialectical Tensions and Rhetorical Tropes in Negotiations”, *Organization Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2004, pp. 35–53; L. Putnam, “Discourse Analysis: Mucking Around with Negotiation Data”, *International Negotiation*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2005 pp. 17–32; L. Putnam, “Negotiation and Discourse Analysis”, *Negotiation Journal*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2010, pp. 145–154.

asks about the qualities a research paradigm needs to have in order to successfully facilitate a discursive approach to diplomatic negotiations. The empirical one asks about the ways in which such an approach can generate new insights into diplomatic negotiations in practice. If it can be adequately shown that a feasible model for analysing diplomatic negotiations through discursive analysis does exist, and that the results of such an analysis generate a considerable amount of added value to our understanding of diplomatic negotiations, then the fruitfulness of the paradigm advocated in this paper will have been demonstrated.

On a theoretical level, I contend that the main obstacle a discursive approach to international negotiation analysis faces, is its incompatibility with the more traditional approaches in the field. It is thus necessary to develop a theoretical model for discourse analysis that integrates the key assumptions and premises of these more 'mainstream' approaches. Such a model should be able to generate novel insights into diplomatic negotiations that still fit into the established state of the art.

To demonstrate the advantages of this approach on a practical level, it will then be applied to a case study looking at the negotiations in the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly. Through this case study, I aim not only to illustrate that discursive methods deserve their place in the multi-disciplinary toolkit of negotiations analysts, but also to produce valuable new insights into the dynamics of negotiation processes taking place inside the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly and its committees.

A theoretical framework for the study of diplomacy through discourses

It can, in a way, be argued that communication is in fact the quintessence of negotiations. For instance, Meerts' proposed definition for diplomatic negotiations, the "*exchange of concessions and compensations in a framework of international order accepted by sovereign entities*",⁶ contains four main elements: an exchange, bargaining, an international order and sovereignty. The most basic of these four, the one that stands at the very core of the definition, is the exchange. Yet whereas academics have paid ample attention to the role of the other three elements in diplomatic negotiations, they have so far neglected exchanges as the most fundamental one. Exchanging means talking, transmitting wishes and demands, gathering information; in other words, exchange is essentially communication.

⁶ Meerts, *Diplomatic Negotiations*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

Addressing this apparent paradox, in which communication can be seen as the core of negotiations, but is often disregarded in its study, will be the starting point of my analysis. Any project promoting a discourse-based approach to diplomatic negotiations has to start by explaining why such an approach is currently not more popular. Looking at language use, communication and interaction during diplomatic meetings seems to be a very logical and obvious way to gain a deeper understanding of negotiation processes. Why is it not done more frequently then?

It appears that a number of very fundamental theoretical differences exist between communication-focused approaches such as discourse analysis and framing analysis, and the approaches that are commonplace in the analysis of diplomatic negotiations. These disparities, I contend, make methods such as critical discourse analysis on a theoretical level incompatible with current negotiation analysis. This prevents the integration of insights produced by discursive methods into the current state of the art in international negotiation analysis and discourages scholars of diplomatic negotiations from employing discourse-analytical tools.

The incompatibility of international negotiation analysis and discourse analysis

Different levels of analysis, different units of analysis and different ontological and epistemological premises are the three crucial discrepancies between discourse analysis and negotiation analysis. This section will take a look at how diverging positions in each of these matters have so far prevented the successful application of discourse analysis to diplomatic negotiations.

A first source of friction concerns the levels at which discourse analysis and diplomatic negotiation analysis conduct their respective research. The latter mainly tries to study negotiation processes as explanations of a negotiation's outcome, meaning it looks at how the result of negotiations can be explained as a product of the negotiation process.⁷ It is interested in the development of the negotiation process as a whole and looks at the big picture, the overall image. Typically, this type of research takes a bird's eye view of negotiations and attempts to divide negotiation processes into stages, analysing diplomatic proceedings as step-by-step progression to an agreement.⁸ This method is common in approaches focusing on the behaviour of actors, such as

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁸ C. Dupont and G. Faure, "The Negotiation Process", in V. Kremenyuk (ed.), *International Negotiation: Analysis, Approaches, Issues*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1991, pp. 40-57.

psychological research.⁹ It can, for example, be a valuable tool to demonstrate how actors progressively entrap themselves.¹⁰ The step-by-step method is typical for game theory, in which trading concessions and gains cumulate into a final agreement or the collapse of the negotiations. It lends itself, for instance, very well to the analysis of tit-for-tat strategies.¹¹ All of these approaches start from the conceptualization of negotiations as a single process, discrete and integrated. Most scholars of diplomatic negotiations concentrate on the macro-level.¹² Discursive approaches, on the other side, often approach their subject on a more detailed micro-level.¹³ They look for small clues and hints that shed light on the dynamics within a process, and try to construct an understanding from the bottom upwards, taking a frog's perspective, rather than a bird's eye view.¹⁴

A second important distinction between the assumptions of discourse analysis and the habits in international negotiation analysis resides in their different research objects. Negotiation analysis is in general predominantly interested in the evolution of negotiations, from the initial contacts to the conclusion of (or the failure to reach) an agreement. Looking for the logical progression of negotiations towards a result, it mostly pays attention to large and significant events, or even to a single decisive development that fundamentally altered or steered the course of the negotiations and had direct impact on the eventual outcome.¹⁵ The ideas of 'ripeness' and 'breakthroughs' in negotiations are related to this sensitivity for crucial occurrences: scholars are interested in precisely when the process is ripe for a decisive event that determines the negotiation process. The analytical units of discourse analysis, however, are usually smaller, more numerous and more insignificant. Discourse

⁹ Rubin, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-288.

¹⁰ P. Meerts, "Entrapment in International Negotiations", in I. W. Zartman and G. Faure (eds.), *Escalation and Negotiation in International Conflicts*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 111-141; J. Brockner and J. Rubin, *Entrapment in Escalating Conflicts: A Social Psychological Analysis*, New York, Springer Science & Business Media, 2012.

¹¹ D. Deschner, F. Lang and F. Bodendorf, "Strategies for software agent based multiple issue negotiations", in K. Bauknecht, S. K. Madria and G. Pernul (eds.), *International Conference on Electronic Commerce and Web Technologies*, Berlin, Springer, 2001, p. 206-215.

¹² A. Faizullaev, "Diplomatic Interactions and Negotiations", *Negotiation Journal*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2014, pp. 275-299.

¹³ N. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*, London, Routledge, 2013.

¹⁴ T. Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen and H. Hamilton (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 2008, pp. 349-371.

¹⁵ Kim's analysis of the second North Korean nuclear crisis is an excellent example of this. T. Kim, "Process of the Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis and Patterns of International Negotiation: Considerations into Continuance and Change", *International Area Studies Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2006, pp. 149-171.

analysts look at all interactions and take their clues just as much from small, seemingly insignificant utterances as from grand speeches. They pay attention to the form, the structure and the phrasing of the message as much as to its actual content.¹⁶ On the whole, discourse analysis is equally concerned with small nuances in formulation as with the rhetorical grandstanding that might accompany a breakthrough moment.

A third aspect in which discourse analysis and diplomatic negotiation analysis are to a certain degree incompatible, relates to what they understand as a better insight into the functioning of negotiations, and, linked to this, how they think such a better insight can be obtained. Their perception of what knowledge consists of, and how knowledge can be gained, differs in a very fundamental manner. In other words, there is an ontological and epistemological gap between both. Mainstream negotiation analysis is predominantly grounded in rationalist and realist notions of ontology and epistemology. Game theory, for instance, is on the ontological level firmly based in the realist notion that international actors make logical, calculated decisions.¹⁷ This means that on an epistemological level, an understanding of the dynamics of the negotiations between these actors comes from the evaluation of their strategies based on rational criteria.¹⁸ The challenge which constructivist approaches pose to the hegemony of realism is weaker in the study of diplomacy than in other areas of International Relations theory.¹⁹ Linguistic and discursive approaches, assume that preferences, objectives and strategies are not rationally predetermined, but socially constructed.²⁰ Their existence cannot be taken for granted, but has to be explained and is worthy of study in their own right. Consequentially, on an epistemological level, discourse analysis does not share the realist notion that studying strategies and objectives constitutes a privileged path to knowledge. It does not suffice to look at the

¹⁶ Fairclough, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ R. Jervis, "Realism, Game Theory, and Cooperation", *World Politics*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1988, pp. 317-349.

¹⁸ E. van Damme, "On the State Of the Art in Game Theory: An Interview with Robert Aumann", *Games and Economic Behavior*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1998, pp. 181-210; R. Selten, "Game Theory, Experience, Rationality", in W. Leinfeller (ed.), *Game Theory, Experience, Rationality*, New York, Springer, 1998, pp. 9-34.

¹⁹ I. Neumann, "Returning Practice To the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy", *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2002, pp. 627-651.

²⁰ Fairclough, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-5; J. Potter, "Discourse Analysis and Constructionist Approaches: Theoretical Background", in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*, Leicester, British Psychological Society, 1996, pp. 125-140.

conscious choice of objectives and strategies, one has to explain how they are created, shaped and evolve throughout the negotiation process.²¹

The methodological consequences of these different assumptions are that discourse analysts are far more concerned with empirical observation, whereas classic game-theorists and rationalist psychologists focus on logical reasoning. One could say that the former work inductively,²² the latter deductively.²³ Going back to Meerts' definition of diplomatic negotiations, which stipulated *exchange* was crucial, it is fair to say that discourse analysts would analyse how this exchange functions by trying to deconstruct it. Game theorists, on the other hand, take it as their starting point: the smallest building block with which they start building a larger narrative. They zoom out from the exchange to a broader picture, whereas discourse analysts zoom in on the exchange to see what it consists of.

Discourse Theory as an approach to study the language of negotiations

This section sketches the contours of a discourse-analytical approach that overcomes the discrepancies outlined in the previous section, without losing the traits that make discourse analysis a valuable method for negotiation analysis in the first place. The approach developed in the Essex School of Discourse Analysis, better known as Discourse Theory, will be the starting point of this attempt at bridge-building. Rooted in the seminal work of Laclau and Mouffe, Discourse Theory is particularly suited for an application to the study of diplomatic negotiations.²⁴

The first issue to tackle is the difference in levels of analysis. Discourse analysts are concerned with the micro-level, negotiation experts with the macro-level. To be able to use discourse analysis in the study of diplomacy, it has to analyse general processes of exchange and not just their constituent parts. Of all types of discourse-analytic approaches, Discourse Theory is best-suited for this purpose since it is inherently the

²¹ E. Vaara, "Taking the Linguistic Turn Seriously: Strategy as a Multifaceted and Interdiscursive Phenomenon", *Advances in Strategic Management*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2010, pp. 29-50.

²² J. Gee, *How to Do Discourse Analysis: A Toolkit*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 37-38; M. Jørgensen and L. J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, Thousand Oakes, SAGE, 2002, pp. 138-174.

²³ A. Greenwald, "Modern Game Theory: Deduction vs. Induction", Paper, New York University, 1997 (unpublished).

²⁴ E. Laclau and C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985/2001. For an accessible introduction to the principles of Discourse Theory, see Jørgensen and Phillips, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-174. Moreover, D. Howarth and J. Torfing (eds.), *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, New York, Springer, 2016, contains numerous examples of what discourse-theoretical approaches look like in practice.

most macro-level-oriented approach.²⁵ Another advantage is the central role that Discourse Theory attributes to the concept of hegemony. Discourse Theory's purpose is to explain why, in the struggle between various discourses as explanations of a particular reality, a discourse becomes dominant or hegemonic. It thus, much like the approaches prevalent in international negotiation analysis, does not just analyse the internal dynamics of the process, but tries to explain its outcome.²⁶ A third reason why Discourse Theory is well-disposed for macro-level analysis, is in how it defines a discourse. Most discursive approaches define any social meaning-making practice as a discourse.²⁷ Hence, even the simplest snippet of meaning such as 'yellow', 'breakfast' or 'running' constitutes a discourse, and our understanding of every one of these terms is the product of a discourse. Discourse Theory, however, sees a discourse more as a framework, a network in which various notions and terms give meaning to each other. Because meaning is forged through connections, equivalences and oppositions, discourses are necessarily of a larger scale in Discourse Theory than in other variants of discourse analysis.

The second problem identified above is the dissimilarity between discursive and 'classic' approaches in their units of analysis. This can be addressed by pointing out that Discourse Theory was specifically designed for the analysis of political and ideological discourses. It is therefore easier to operationalize for the study of diplomatic processes than other discursive approaches, such as Discursive Psychology or Conversation Analysis. This does not mean that Discourse Theory completely crosses over from the study of small nuances to an approach focusing on crucial moments and decisive actions. It still revolves around practical language use, yet it can easily incorporate and explain such decisive developments, since the changes in rhetoric that undoubtedly accompany them will result in re-organizations in the networks which discourses consist of, which a discourse-theoretical analysis will be able to pick up on.

The final issue, the epistemological and ontological gap between discursive methods and negotiation analysis, is the most fundamental one in nature. The main differences are the realist-constructivist gap on an ontological level, and the rationalist-empiricist

²⁵ A. Norval and Y. Stavrakakis, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, Hegemonies and Social Change*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 18; C. Sutherland, "Nation-Building Through Discourse Theory", *Nations and Nationalism*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, pp. 185-202.

²⁶ J. Townshend, "Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: A New Paradigm from the Essex School?", *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2003, pp. 131-132.

²⁷ N. Fairclough, J. Mulderrig and R. Wodak. "Critical Discourse Analysis", in T. Van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, Thousand Oaks, Sage, 2011, pp. 357-378.

gap on an epistemological level. Rather than trying to tackle two of the most legendary debates in the philosophy of science, I will concentrate on smoothing the rough edges of Discourse Theory's constructivism and empiricism, showing how these discordances do not need to stop meaningful collaboration. This can be done by referring to the difference between 'thick' and 'thin', or 'major key' and 'minor key' Discourse Theory.²⁸ As Discourse Theory gained prominence as a critical approach in political science, its radical rejection of economic and institutional factors as causal mechanisms became untenable in practice, for it effectively resulted in isolationism on a theoretical level and descriptivism on a methodological level. No connection whatsoever with other research paradigms was possible, for a rigorous discourse-theoretical approach will consider any arguments, for instance from a Marxist, a realist or a liberal-institutionalist perspective, as a reductionist representation of something that really arises out of social praxis.²⁹ If a scholar believes to be operating on a more fundamental ontological level than all other approaches, learning from them becomes very hard.³⁰ To overcome this issue, Townshend developed the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' Discourse Theory.³¹ In this distinction, the 'thick' or 'major key' scholars stay true to theoretical radicalism, including the weaknesses of isolationism, descriptivism and relativism. Townshend contrasts this with a form of Discourse Theory that, while staying constructivist in nature, is open to "the possibility of greater methodological pluralism" can "be combined with other more materialist or institutional forms of explanation widely used in political science".³²

The idea of a 'thin' Discourse Theory is very appealing in the context of this study because it allows to downplay the ontological and epistemological problems under consideration.³³ Explicitly committing to methodological and theoretical pluralism allows to mitigate the ontological and epistemological conflict between Discourse Theory and the established traditions in the study of diplomatic negotiations.

To demonstrate the potential of discourse-theoretical approach in practice, the next section applies the framework to a case study drawn from the negotiations in the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly. The Assembly was picked as a case study for three reasons: minutes from its meetings are publicly available, which is crucial for

²⁸ Townshend, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-142.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-131.

³¹ *Ibid.*; McLennan, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-57.

³² Townshend, *op. cit.*, pp. 133, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-135.

conducting a discourse analysis; the existing research lends itself very well to reframing in a discourse analytic perspective; and the fact that it constitutes a closed system. With this last remark, I mean that there are no other venues or settings in which the actors meet than the one under scrutiny. One might wonder, though, to what degree Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are indeed diplomats in the classic sense. While there are of course significant differences between the roles of professional diplomats and parliamentarians, the importance of parliamentary diplomacy and the degree to which parliamentarians act as representatives of their countries in multilateral contexts cannot be underestimated.³⁴ As such, EURONEST forms a valid setting for the type of research that is proposed here.

A discourse-theoretical analysis of the EURONEST negotiations

The EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly is part of the larger framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and brings together MEPs and parliamentarians of states which participate in the Eastern Partnership (EaP). I will draw on discussions in all of the Assembly's sub-committees and in its general assembly. All debates which were analysed took place between EURONEST's inception in 2011 and the winter session of 2015. The sources used for this exercise are the minutes of the plenary meetings of the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly and of its four subcommittees, dealing with 'Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy'; 'Energy Security'; 'Economic Integration, Legal Approximation and Convergence with EU Policies'; and 'Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Civil Society'.

In particular, this paper will assess three concepts which in the literature have been applied to the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly: inter- and intra-institutional relations, bureaucratic functioning and socialization. It will apply a discourse-theoretical approach to each of these concepts, in order to show how the discursive constitution of a debate affects the negotiation process. This means that I will try to re-understand these concepts by looking not just at their nature, but at the way they are discursively constructed during the debate. For example, this paper is not interested in the bureaucratic functionality of EURONEST, but in how this bureaucratic functionality is referred to by negotiators during sessions. All three issues under discussion are fairly straightforward, and their importance to negotiation processes is relatively clear. As

³⁴ D. Fiott, "On the Value of Parliamentary Diplomacy", *Madariaga Paper*, vol. 4, no. 7, 2011, pp. 1-7.

such, they are used relatively often in the analysis of negotiations.³⁵ I will look at the meta-level of these concept, by analysing their construction by the negotiators (how are intra- and inter-institutional relations in a bureaucracy described by negotiators, are they invoked in a particular way to try and steer the negotiation process?) instead of asking about their statuses in the EURONEST negotiations (is EURONEST functional on a bureaucratic level? How are relations with other institutions).

A discourse-theoretical approach to institutional relations in negotiations

Looking at institutional relations through a discourse-theoretical lens provides a good illustration of how discourse analysis can contribute to the study of diplomatic negotiations. It is of course impossible to analyse the quality, the nature or even the structure of EURONEST's intra-institutional relations and its relationship with other institutions by using Discourse Theory. Discourse Theory analyses language and has little to nothing to say about the performance of organizational frameworks. What can be done with Discourse Theory, however, and this is where the novelty of a discourse-theoretical approach resides, is analysing how these intra- and inter-institutional relationships are framed, discussed and characterized. In other words, rather than looking at the state of institutional relations, one can study the way they are used, performed and perceived by the negotiators. This may not be very useful if the aim is to improve these structures, yet if the goal is to study the impact of institutional relations on the negotiation process, perception and usage are probably more important than actual functionality.³⁶

Regarding EURONEST, Kaca, Kucharczyk and Łada argue that (one of) the reason(s) why EURONEST, the Civil Society Forum and the Eastern Partnership as a whole fail to achieve their goals, is their institutional design.³⁷ Does the way in which negotiators employ and operationalize institutional relations in practice confirm this? The answer to this question is to a large degree affirmative. Negotiators invoke the institutional organization of the Eastern Partnership in the EURONEST negotiations mainly to

³⁵ S. Meunier, "What single voice? European institutions and EU-US trade negotiations", *International organization*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2000, pp. 103-135; A. Hoda, *Tariff Negotiations and Renegotiations under the GATT and the WTO: Procedures and Practices*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001; J. Checkel, "International institutions and socialization in Europe: Introduction and framework", *International organization*, vol. 59, no. 4, 2005, pp. 801-826 provide fine illustrations for each of the three respective concepts used.

³⁶ P. Haas and E. Haas, "Pragmatic Constructivism and the Study of International Institutions", *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3, 2002, pp. 573-601.

³⁷ E. Kaca, J. Kucharczyk and A. Łada, "Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum & How to Improve It", Study, *Institute of Public Affairs*, Warsaw, 2011, p. 6.

privilege intra- over inter-institutional relations; and to emphasize the inter-institutional ties between EURONEST and the overarching Eastern Partnership.³⁸ Both have a negative impact on the negotiation dynamic, as will be shown below.

The institutional mechanism that negotiators mention most frequently is the intra-institutional organization of EURONEST. In a very subtle but very powerful manner, the way the EURONEST Assembly is organized internally is mentioned far more frequently than how it relates to other institutions externally. The term 'partner' is thereby a crucial term. Particularly during the first meetings of EURONEST, the parliamentarians from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova were frequently addressed as 'partners'. Štefan Füle, Commissioner for Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood, used the term multiple times in his speech to the second plenary meeting of EURONEST:

"we now have an instrument that allows us [the EU] to make our support better tailored to the ambitions, needs and aspirations of the partners";³⁹

"the plans in place to increase assistance to the partners";⁴⁰

"the EU wished to bring its Eastern partners as close to it as possible and assist them in completing political and economic reforms."⁴¹

Marek Siwiec, Algirdas Saugardas, Jan Gerbrandy, Jan Hökmark and Kirsten Vigenin, all MEPs, and Averof Neophytou, a member of the Cypriot Parliament, similarly used the term 'partners' or 'Eastern partners' to refer to the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Ukrainian, Georgian and Moldovan parliamentarians.⁴² Commissioner Füle and MEP Gerbrandy used this figure of speech again during the third plenary meeting in Brussels, as did MEP Edit Herczog.⁴³ Even the secretariat drafting the minutes of the meetings used the phrase 'partners' in the first years of EURONEST.⁴⁴

On a superficial level, there seems to be nothing particular about the term 'partners'. The EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly is after all a part of the Eastern *Partnership*.

³⁸ This contradicts the observation by Kaca, Kucharczyk and Łada that one institutional failure is a lack of contact between various branches of the Eastern Partnership.

³⁹ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, "Second Ordinary Session Minutes", Baku, 3 April 2012, p. 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11, 16-18.

⁴³ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, "Third Ordinary Session Minutes", Brussels, 28 May 2013, pp. 2-4, 8.

⁴⁴ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy, "Minutes of the Constituent Meeting", Brussels, 3 May 2010, p. 1.

However, the term is only used in reference to non-EU parliamentarians. The term 'partnership' usually indicates an egalitarian relationship between two or more parties who are each other's equals. This sentiment changes, however, when not all parties are addressed as partners anymore. When this happens, a hierarchical structure is introduced, in which the parties who are not addressed as 'partners' are placed at the centre of the relationship, while the 'partners' are demoted to a peripheral position. This can be illustrated with a simple example. In a marriage, both halves of the couple are equal partners. When a friend of the husband talks about the couple, he will refer to 'my friend and his partner', though, not to 'the partners'. For the husband's friend, the husband is the more important part of the marriage, as the husband is his friend, and he is only acquainted with the wife because she married his friend. He will thus only refer to his friend's spouse as 'partner', addressing his friend by his name or his title of friend. This shows how the asymmetrical use of the term 'partner' denotes a lower hierarchical position of importance.

In this matter, it is crucial to stress that according to Discourse Theory, meaning is generated through association. When the meaning of EURONEST on an institutional level becomes fixed as one in which the EU and its partners are hierarchically unequal, other signifying practices are affected by this. Thus, when in the EURONEST Assembly, the European Parliament delegation is not addressed as a partner, unlike all others, on a linguistic level a hierarchy is introduced into the Assembly, in which the European Parliament delegation is seen as the centre of the Assembly, and all other delegations are framed as less important. While this may in fact be true in practice, it completely overrides all attempts to ensure joint ownership and mutual partnership in the Assembly, which are frequently referred during the negotiations, and which are explicitly mentioned in EURONEST's rules of procedure.⁴⁵ As such, the explicit goal of joint ownership is negatively affected by subtle discursive practices. Given how crucial co-ownership is for the success of negotiations touching on normative subjects, it is understandable that the negation of this co-ownership on a discursive level is profoundly detrimental.⁴⁶

The way in which EURONEST is linked on a discursive level to the Eastern Partnership is a second institutional factor that has an effect on the negotiation dynamics in

⁴⁵ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, "Second Ordinary Session", *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 12; EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, "Rules of Procedure", *op. cit.*, art. 1.

⁴⁶ N. Tocci, "Profiling Normative Foreign Policy: The European Union and Its Global Partners", *CEPS Working Documents*, no. 279, Brussels, 2007, pp. 1-18.

EURONEST. A good illustration of this is the way in which Boris Tarasyuk, the co-President of EURONEST in 2012, mentioned in the second plenary meeting that “Euronest PA was becoming an inseparable and durable part of EaP”.⁴⁷ A similar sentiment was voiced by Commissioner Füle during the same meeting:

“The EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly were [sic] an important element of the Eastern Partnership. There were high expectations regarding its potential contribution to the implementation of the partnership.”⁴⁸

This discursive link between the Eastern Partnership and the EURONEST committee disappears, however, in later meetings. Mentions of the Eastern Partnership as an institutional structure decrease in frequency altogether, and when the EaP is mentioned, the relation between EURONEST and the partnership is described in a remarkably different fashion. For example, MEP Gunnar Hökmark

“called the Members to take the responsibility to secure a political process within both the Eastern Partnership and the Euronest Parliamentary Assembly, and to conduct a constructive discussion leading to decisions.”⁴⁹

Here, EURONEST is no longer presented as part of or even linked to the Partnership, but as an institution existing independently of it. The phrase ‘within both x and y’ usually denotes unrelated entities which share a particular trait. One can, for instance, state that ‘improvement is necessary within both the USA and China’. The ‘USA and China’ are unconnected entities in these phrases, only linked through their shared need for improvement, and they have an equal relationship on a linguistic level (in these phrases, China does not need improvement more or less than the US). If the same goes for ‘within both the Eastern Partnership and the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly’, then this is indeed a very peculiar framing, as the Eastern Partnership and EURONEST are neither independent nor equal, yet this is the way they are framed by this wording.

The explanation of this very interesting turn-of-phrase is the fact that discursively linking EURONEST and the Eastern Partnership is detrimental to the negotiations within EURONEST. By associating EURONEST with the Partnership, all problems that exist in the Partnership are immediately invoked in the Assembly as well. When Commissioner Füle

⁴⁷ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, “Second Ordinary Session”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴⁹ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy, “Draft minutes of the meeting of Monday 27 May 2013”, Brussels, 27 May 2013, p. 1.

states that he has “high expectations regarding its potential contribution to the implementation of the partnership”, he effectively tasks the members of the EURONEST Assembly with solving the existing problems of the Eastern Partnership.⁵⁰ This kind of statements prevents the members of the Assembly from starting the negotiations with a clean slate. Instead, they are burdened with the legacy of countless attempts and as many failures, with existing animosities and with pre-drawn red lines. It is therefore very understandable why in later meetings, negotiators refrained from mentioning the Eastern Partnership too often, and even tried to dissociate it from EURONEST: this gives them more space to develop their own approach. This discursive dissociation of EURONEST from the Eastern Partnership and the European Neighbourhood Policy can effectively be seen as a way to escape previously existing entrapment.

On a theoretical level, this analysis can be captured in discourse-theoretical terms as follows: by creating an equivalency between EURONEST and the Eastern Partnership, the discursive struggles related to the discussions in the EaP are introduced into the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, and meanings immediately become fixed for both parties in such a way that very little common ground for agreement is left. By avoiding the association between EURONEST and the EaP, the meanings in the discursive field of the EURONEST Assembly remain open, and the Assembly members are freer to develop their own discourses and their own positions, unimpeded by previously existing discourses. As meanings are not yet fixed, they have the space to develop common interpretations of particular nodal points and to create shared signifiers that can potentially even lead to the development of a common discourse. Establishing a discursive link between EURONEST and the EaP eliminates this space and immediately fixes all meanings in the way they already exist in the EaP, leaving no scope for successful convergence towards a mutual understanding.

A discourse-theoretical approach to bureaucratic functionality in negotiations

The same approach will now be used to investigate how the social construction of procedural and bureaucratic opportunities and constraints shape the negotiation dynamics. Petrova and Raube have briefly analysed the role that these issues play in the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly.⁵¹ For lack of space, I will only focus on two specific issues here; the role of the chair and the rules of procedure.

⁵⁰ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, “Second Ordinary Session”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁵¹ I. Petrova and K. Raube, “Euronest: What Drives Inter-Parliamentary Cooperation in the Eastern Partnership?”, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2016, pp. 35-55.

The chair's position in the negotiations is more than just a formal position of institutional power. From a discourse-theoretical perspective, his (or her) role is often loosely defined, and the way it is fulfilled in practice depends on the way he acts and behaves on the one hand, but also on what he constructs his role to be, together with other parties.⁵² The degree to which the role of the chair is the product of a negotiation between the parties is underestimated in the traditional literature on chairmanship, which is in general very focused on formal privileges.⁵³ Approaches disregarding the social aspects of how a meeting is chaired miss how interaction and behaviour can increase or decrease the effective power of the chair, and therefore, how the way the role of the chair is fulfilled in practice facilitates or constrains the negotiations. The performance of the chair, in turn, fundamentally alters the political landscape in which the negotiations take place. Discourse Theory, with its focus on the social construction of meaning, is well placed to assess this kind of dynamic.

An intervention by MEP Miloslav Ransdorf, co-chair of the Energy Committee of EURONEST, is a very interesting example, as Ransdorf uses his institutional position as a chair very effectively here, with an impact far stronger than the one envisioned in the rules of procedure. The matter under debate is the energy cooperation between the EU and the Eastern European states. This is a very contentious topic, as developing a strong European policy on energy has so far proven difficult.⁵⁴ As this is one of the few competences discussed in EURONEST where the Eastern European states are looking for to the EU to step up its game, rather than the other way around, the potential for animosity is understandably quite high.

Against the odds, Ransdorf steers clear of this peril by skilfully using his position as a chair to the maximal extent possible. Before his intervention, Asim Mollazade, on behalf of the Azerbaijani delegation, brought the EU's failure to develop a credible policy to the attention of the committee, stressing particularly "the differences within energy supply systems and policies among EU MS [Member States]", the failure of the Nabucco project and the lack of "progress in discussing new projects for supplying

⁵² K. Coleman, "Locating Norm Diplomacy: Venue Change in International Norm 'Negotiations'", *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2013, pp. 163-186; J. Depledge, "A Special Relationship: Chairpersons and the Secretariat in the Climate Change Negotiations", *Global Environmental Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2007, pp. 45-68.

⁵³ J. Tallberg, "The Power of the Chair: Formal Leadership in International Cooperation", *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2010, pp. 241-265.

⁵⁴ D. Buchan and M. Keay, *Europe's Long Energy Journey: Towards an Energy Union?*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016.

further gas to Europe, such as the Trans-Caspian gas transport project".⁵⁵ MEP Edit Herczog responded to this that "that EU MS enjoyed their full sovereignty [sic] to decide on their energy mix policies", and that the European Commission should not be blamed for this conundrum.⁵⁶ A row over who is responsible for the existing problems seemed to be on the cards, until Ransdorf intervened:

"Co-Chair Mr RANSDORF paid tribute to Azerbaijan by reminding the importance of Caspian Sea's oil in the supply of the Red Army during the Second World War. He underlined that the costs and taxation for producing energy in the EU were very high, as compared to the ones of the US. He then encouraged the European Commission to reflect on this issue. He also regretted that energy relation issues, such as the compatibility [sic] of EU and Ukrainian electricity networks represented a negligible part of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement. He concluded by noting that there were many ideological components in debates on energy policies and the drivers of policy decision-making should be rather based on realism."⁵⁷

Praising a nation for its historic role in World War II would appear posed in a normal context, but coming from a member of the Czech communist party, the way he commends the Azerbaijanis for supporting the Red Army comes across as genuine and heartfelt. He successfully uses his political background to appease the anger of the Azerbaijanis. Ransdorf continues by agreeing with the Azerbaijani parliamentarian that the EU policy in this matter is failing in numerous areas. In most cases, a statement by one of the members of the European Parliament's far-left group would not be of great importance for the position of other MEPs. However, Ransdorf draws on his role as the co-chair representing the EU side. While normally a purely functional role, Ransdorf expands his role discursively to make it appear as if he spoke on behalf of the whole European Parliament side of the committee. His call that "drivers of policy decision-making should be [...] based on realism", is a crucial phrase in this regard.⁵⁸ Being called out by a communist MEP on their lack of realism is a humbling experience to the other MEPs. As his intervention successfully appeases the Azerbaijani delegation, it becomes very difficult for MEPs to challenge him on pretending to speak for the whole of the EU. Effectively, nobody tried to rebuttal the criticism of the EU's incoherence.

⁵⁵ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Energy Security, "12 February 2014", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Ransdorf is not just using his role to the fullest extent possible, it is important to stress that he is actively expanding his role through the way he behaves and speaks. This is very clearly demonstrated by the way the Georgian co-chair of the committee failed to pull the same trick Ransdorf used:

“Co-Chair Mr Victor DOLIDZE (Georgia) expressed his opposition to the amendment n° 23.

Mr Jacek SARYUSZ-WOLSKI (EP) asked Mr DOLIDZE not to abuse from his position as co-Chair to plea for the choices of Members. ⁵⁹”

Using “his position as co-chair to plea for the choices of Members” was precisely what Ransdorf did, yet he not only got away with it, but he also managed to push through the position he was pleading for. That is because unlike Dolidze, Ransdorf carefully constructed a position for himself from which such an intervention became possible. His ‘realism’ discourse and the exploitation of his outsider position *vis-à-vis* the rest of the European Parliament delegation was crucial in this.

The previous examples demonstrated that way in which the chair affects the negotiation process depends on the discursive construction of his (or her) role, not necessarily on an objective evaluation of his performance. The effect can be both positive and negative. A similar argument will now be made in relation to the rules of procedure. I will show that perhaps even more important than the actual regulations contained in them, the way the rules of procedure are used and practiced determine their impact on the negotiation process.

A negative and unconstructive framing of the rules of procedure can be observed in the 2011 meeting of the Political Committee, when the Armenian representative Hovhannesyanyan and MEP and co-chair Hökmark entered into a heated argument. The Armenian delegation had tabled an amendment that was difficult to stomach for some European members, after which the chair proposed a compromise. The Armenians accepted this, but did not realize that by doing so, they accepted to withdraw their own amendment. The dispute about the rules of procedure that followed led an indignant Ukrainian representative, Tarasyuk, to the remark that “both EURONEST components, EP and EaP, are equal”, with an MEP, Tannock, self-

⁵⁹ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy, “27 May 2013”, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

conceitedly responding that “according to the voting rules, if a compromise amendment is approved the rest of the amendments on the same issue fall”.⁶⁰

Here, the rules of procedure are framed by Tarasyuk in such a way as to suggest that they were drafted to serve the purposes and objectives of the European Parliament delegation to EURONEST. This is of course a negative way to project the rules of procedure, but even worse is the remark by Tannock, who basically confirms Tarasyuk’s portrayal. Both sides give meaning to the rules of procedure in this argument as a tool of the strong to subdue the weak, in a way that emphasizes internal divisions. The rules of procedure do not necessarily innately favour one party or another (they were drafted in a working group of which all factions are part), but in this debate, they are cast in such a way as to reinforce the previously discussed concept of ‘Europeans vs. partners’.

The opposite, however, is equally possible. In a debate on the very contentious topic of sovereignty and national integrity, which touches immediately on the Nagorno-Karabakh question, one of the rapporteurs “thanked the Euronest Secretariat for all the assistance provided in drafting the report”.⁶¹ Here, he tries to invoke the image of the secretariat as a neutral, bureaucratic institution, in order to depoliticize this highly controversial matter. By associating the report with the technocratic secretariat, the latter’s aura of neutrality hopefully reflects on the former. This is of course a very minor discursive ploy in a far more encompassing attempt to construct the report as an objective document, but it is an illustrative example of how procedural matters can take on significance in discourses going beyond their merely regulatory capacity.

A discourse-theoretical approach to socialization in negotiations

It was argued by Kostanyan and Vandecasteele that one of the goals of the EURONEST Assembly is to socialize the Eastern European parliamentarians; to drench them in European values, norms and ideas in the hope that they internalize some of them.⁶² To understand this in discourse-theoretical terms, the concept of an ‘empty

⁶⁰ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy, “14 September 2011”, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

⁶¹ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy, “Minutes of the meeting of Thursday 14 February 2013”, Tbilisi, 14 February 2013, p. 6.

⁶² H. Kostanyan and B. Vandecasteele, “Socializing the European Neighbourhood: The European Parliament and the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly”, in S. Stavridis and D. Irrera (eds.), *The European Parliament and Its International Relations*, London, Routledge, 2015, pp. 220-233.

signifier' is very useful. As Meerts argues, values and norms cannot be negotiated in their pure form, but trust and mutual understanding are needed before one can talk about such touchy and sensitive subjects.⁶³ In Discourse Theory, building a mutual understanding when the actual, underlying views do not align, can be understood through 'empty signifiers'. These allow parties to discuss norms and values as if these were common and shared between them, covering up the fact that the parties have in fact very different views on them by allowing multiple interpretations. In this way, trust can be built and a mutual, if incomplete understanding can be constructed which over time might allow these different interpretations to converge, resulting in socialization. The first step in this process is the construction of concepts that can incorporate the different values of all parties into a single signifying system, by allowing for as many different interpretations as there are different value systems.

In this section, I will look at some specific attempts at socialization in EURONEST, and at how discursive factors affected success in these cases.

An illustration of discourse that negatively impacts on socialization is the speech of Richard Tibbels, head of the Eastern Partnership division of the European External Action Service, at the meeting of the Political Committee in Brussels in 2014:

"The EU will move ahead by ensuring that partnerships go hand in hand with a high degree of differentiation. A tailor-made approach, as a key principle of the EaP, has already taken shape."

"The EU [has] expressed concerns in the past about the functioning of justice and supported the reform of judiciary to a very large extent in Georgia. On the basis of the 'more for more' principle, the EU can tailor the level of its financial support to the commitment of partners to implement reforms. If Georgia wants to go further in its relations with the EU and, in a way, wants to impose a conditionality to itself, the effective implementation of the Association Agreement, in all its aspects, is absolutely crucial."⁶⁴

These comments instigated the Azerbaijani parliamentarian Elkhan Suleyman to

"[call] on the EU to treat Azerbaijan as a full-fledged member of the Eastern Partnership, respect it as a sovereign state and stop unjustified pressures on the country. Azerbaijan seeks more cooperation with the

⁶³ Meerts, *Diplomatic Negotiations*, *op. cit.*, p. 63; M. Anstey and P. Meerts, "Lessons for Practice", in I.W. Zartman, M. Anstey and P. Meerts (eds.), *The Slippery Slope to Genocide: Reducing Identity Conflicts and Preventing Mass Murder*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 376-390.

⁶⁴ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Political Affairs, Human Rights and Democracy, "Minutes of the meeting of Tuesday, 4 November 2014", Brussels, 4 November 2014, pp. 2-3.

EU provided that the EU treats it as an equal partner, like it does with some other partner countries of the EaP.”⁶⁵

The issue with Tibbels' speech is that, while it attempts to socialize, it does not at all fit the discourse-theoretical conceptualization of socialization outlined above. It prevents the development of a mutual understanding, rather than facilitating it. Tibbels' comment “that the EU can tailor the level of its financial support to the commitment of partners to implement reforms”, for instance, is detrimental to the construction of empty signifiers, because it effectively points out that the reason why Georgia should reform its justice system is the financial incentive attached to the reform, not the common values the EU and Georgia share. A mutual understanding based on constructive ambiguity is not only obsolete, but impossible in this case, because the statement that “if Georgia wants to go further in its relations with the EU and, in a way, wants to impose a conditionality to itself” suggests that Georgia is not naturally aligned with the EU based on common values and norms, but that it has a choice to make in this matter. Pointing out a clear-cut choice between two options (integration or no integration), and attaching financial incentives to the former, destroys the illusion that there is not really a choice at all because the former is the natural, logical path. Yet it is precisely this constructed illusion that is the crucial pre-condition to socialization.

An example in which empty signifiers are used effectively in order to create a mutual understanding that can serve as a basis for socialization, is the following excerpt, relating to a debate on intercultural dialogue in the context of the Eastern Partnership:

“The co-rapporteurs, Ms Zdanoka (Greens/EFA, Latvia) and M. Jeyhun Osmanli (Azerbaijan) underlined the good level of cooperation they had achieved, which certainly allowed to them present what they felt were common priorities. Thus, Ms Zdanoka highlighted the need to protect the linguistic & cultural rights of minorities; M. Osmanli, for his part, especially underlined the need to take steps in order to protect the cultural heritage dimension in territories marred by conflict and war, and, indeed, especially in the case of protracted ones.

Both co-rapporteurs were, furthermore, on the same wavelength with the European Commission (DG Education and Culture) which insisted that the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the promotion of cultural diversity was the overarching framework of EU/EaP cooperation in the field.”⁶⁶

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly, Committee on Social Affairs, Education, Culture and Civil Society, “Minutes of the meeting of 13 February 2014”, Brussels, 13 February 2014, p. 3.

The procedure that was discussed at the beginning of this section is nicely illustrated here. 'Intercultural dialogue' is used as an empty signifier, something that all parties at the table cherish and support. The precise content of what intercultural dialogue entails, is left open though. Zdanoka, a progressive, sees minority rights as most important. This being a sensitive issue to the Azerbaijanis in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh, Osmanli would rather stress the protection of "cultural heritage in territories marred by conflict and war", which accentuates his side's interests. The concept of 'intercultural dialogue', however, allows them to maintain that they are in agreement and "on the same wavelength" with each other and the Commission, while still permitting both of them to stress their personal (and probably partially incompatible) interests. By structuring their discourse around the empty signifier 'intercultural dialogue', space is created for the construction of a common understanding. Successfully so, as no disagreement was noted.⁶⁷

Conclusion

This paper examined the potential a discourse-analytic approach holds for the study of diplomatic negotiations. In order to do this, it was necessary to demonstrate that such an approach is theoretically feasible and can contribute to the understanding of negotiations in practice.

The theoretical question about what a discursive approach to international negotiation analysis could look like, revolves around addressing the reasons why such an approach has not been used before. The main obstacles a discursive approach faces when applied to diplomatic negotiations are a number of crucial theoretical discrepancies between discourse analysis and the methods dominating the multi-disciplinary study of international negotiations. Discourse analysis is more geared towards a micro-level, prefers more precise units of analysis, and is based on empiricist and often relativist premises. By contrast, the approaches most prevalent in the study of diplomatic negotiations focus on the macro-level, study key turning points and decisive moments in the negotiations, and are based on realist, positivist premises. This theoretical incompatibility helps explain why discourse analysts have not ventured into the study of diplomatic negotiations and why, *mutatis mutandis*, students of diplomatic negotiations have not drawn on the considerable investigative resources of discourse analysis.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Yet, it can hardly be denied that discourse analysis does herald promise for the study of negotiations, despite the theoretical obstacles. If negotiations are indeed a process of interaction and exchange, discourse analysis can help study the most atomic part of these interactions and exchanges: the language and speech they consist of. Discourse analysis can help us understand how particular sentences, phrases, wordings and turn-takings affect communication during the negotiations, and how this communication in turn affects the whole negotiation process. However, before this potential can be exploited, the obstacles preventing the application of discourse analysis to the study of negotiations have to be overcome. Discourse analysis in the tradition of Laclau and Mouffe allows for the discursive study of diplomatic negotiation processes, thanks to its inherently macroscopic view, its specific design for the study of political communication and a number of particular traits in its ontological and epistemological assumptions.

Turning to the empirical side, what are the practical insights that a discursive approach can generate? To illustrate this, I studied the negotiations between MEPs and parliamentarians from ENP countries in the EURONEST Parliamentary Assembly from a discourse-theoretical perspective. I particularly looked at the intra- and inter-institutional relations of EURONEST, its bureaucratic functionality, and socialization efforts. The case study sheds light on how various aspects of the negotiation process in EURONEST depend on their social construction. It was shown, for instance, that the way in which a chair constructs and performs his (or e) role discursively is just as important as the formal rules regulating chairmanship. Similarly, socialization depends not just on the setting and the situation, but also on the way in which actors interact within this setting. Generally, I illustrated how particular framings and phrasings regarding these issues affect negotiations in subtle, unexpected ways, both in helpful and obstructive manners. The negotiation dynamics in the EURONEST Assembly, and in the ENP as a whole, are not solely determined by the structure in which they take place and by the strategies and bargaining chips used by the various actors. Smaller, subtler elements such as a particular action by the chair, a way of addressing the parties at the table, an ill-conceived invocation of the rules of procedure or a timely reference to the wider institutional context can also affect the direction of the negotiations, for better or for worse. It is for the negotiators to be aware of the sensitivities of their partners, and to adapt particular phrasings and expressions to these sensitivities.

This case study resulted in valuable insights about the use of language in negotiations that can help EURONEST members in concrete situations, but more important, it equally showed the vitality and viability of a discourse-theoretical approach to the study of diplomatic negotiations. The way in which diplomats talk about the issues over which they negotiate, steers the negotiation process in the same way strategy, interests, and bargaining chips do. Language is an explanatory variable in the study of diplomatic negotiations, that has, so far, not been given due attention. If this paper managed to demonstrate that discourse analysis in general, and Discourse Theory in particular, are valid approaches to rectify this hiatus in the research, then I have achieved what I set out to do.

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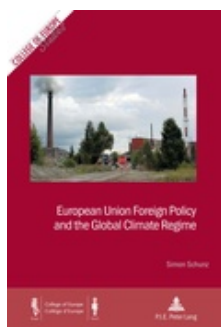
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