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European Union diplomats: an emerging epistemic community?

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Executive Summary

> The Lisbon Treaty introduced far-reaching changes in the field of European Union (EU) external action, including institutional reforms such as the *de facto* creation of an EU diplomatic service and new policy-making instruments. Yet, ten years later, some scholars and policy-makers alike still seem to believe that EU diplomats are mere coordinators of member states' positions.

> What does the notion of 'EU diplomat' as a hybrid figure mediating between national diplomacy and the EU's post-Westphalian diplomatic engagement stand for? This policy brief argues that we are witnessing the emergence of a novel epistemic community, that is, a unique network of EU professionals with specific expertise and competences.

> In order to continue shaping its own diplomatic culture and epistemic community, the EU should invest more in training, contributing to the following key goals: the promotion of 'layered' knowledge, a shared working culture among EU officials, joint ownership of EU external action between EU and member state diplomats, reinforced socialisation and the further development of an *esprit de corps*.

"Europe today is an indispensable partner for all those working towards a more cooperative and non-confrontational global order. … In these years [during my mandate] I have seen that the European Union can live up to this role. To do so, it has to continue on the path of greater unity, consistency and integration. It has to continue its global engagement and commitment". These closing remarks of the lecture delivered by Federica Mogherini, outgoing High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP), at the College of Europe in Bruges in October 2019 strongly resonate with a – by now – widely held assessment. The stronger role of the HR/VP post-Lisbon and the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the EU's *de facto* diplomatic service, represents a fundamental step towards both the 'politicisation' and the 'securitisation' of EU diplomacy, that is, EU external action becoming more political and security-focused (Smith 2018: 42).

Ten years after the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, member states' fears that the EU would significantly undermine their monopoly over diplomatic relations with third countries have not come true – even though a genuine European Union diplomacy has been developing. Does this imply that a distinct category of 'EU diplomats' has emerged in the post-Westphalian diplomatic world? And if so, what makes a 'good' EU diplomat?

This policy brief argues that we are indeed witnessing the emergence of a new epistemic community of 'EU diplomats', that is, a network of professionals having developed competences and expertise in a specific domain, and who have an "authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area" (Haas 1992: 3).The characterisation of a 'good' – capable and effective – EU diplomat needs to start from an in-depth understanding of the characteristics of 21st century diplomacy as well as of the EU as a hybrid polity. To that end, the policy brief first analyses how diplomacy needs to be conceived in the 21st century. Second, it discusses the role of the EEAS, before spelling out what characterises a 'good' European Union diplomat in this context. Finally, it presents a set of recommendations on how to strengthen EU diplomacy by creating a stronger *esprit de corps* among its diplomats.

21st century diplomacy: more connected, more complex

A brief scrutiny of diplomacy in the 21st century helps shedding light on the particular tasks and skills required of contemporary diplomats. According to Maurer (2015: 275), diplomacy can be conceived as a "political activity existing in order to pursue objectives of foreign policies without resort to force, propaganda or law which consists of communication between officials and includes such discrete activities as gathering information clarifying intentions, engendering goodwill". As Bátora (2005: 45) emphasises, "diplomats add a specialized group of professionals recruited and socialised precisely into the dual role that the enterprise of diplomacy requires them to fulfil", one as carrier of interests and policies of a specific state, and the other in relation to other states in an international environment with no overarching authority.

While these general characterisations of diplomats continue to hold true, 21st century diplomacy comes with a specific set of evolving challenges, which have also re-shaped the roles and portfolios of diplomats (Gstöhl 2012). Importantly, an increasing number of actors has gained political recognition: from non-governmental organisations to media, more and more groups and networks beyond the state and international organisations have become key political players, and have been re-shaping the 'rules of the game' of diplomacy. As a result, an increasing sectoralisation of diplomacy can be observed, with diplomats sharing competences and know-how with non-traditional actors. Furthermore, the growing importance of networks, conceived as forms of non-hierarchical political steering, require different sorts of negotiation skills related to persuasion and the exchange of resources among actors. All this entails that there has been a gradual move away from the traditional concept of diplomacy closely intertwined with state sovereignty towards 'post-Westphalian diplomacy' transcending state-centrism.

Moreover, the communication tools available have also had transformational effects: the internet and social media have changed the perception of relevant transboundary events, as well as the speed and availability of information. By consequence, negotiations are becoming increasingly complex and encompass so many fields that diplomats have transformed into 'facilitators' whose task it is to bring together different networks relevant in global policy-making processes.

In light of the specificities that define 21st century diplomacy, the European Union is a novel political actor transcending the Westphalian concept of diplomacy.

The EEAS and its Delegations at the heart of EU diplomacy

The broad depiction of diplomacy proposed by Maurer (2015: 275) does well reflect the EU's engagement in diplomatic activities. EU diplomats do put forward the EU's interests at different levels and are strongly engaged in communication and information-gathering tasks. Such communication and information exchanges take place both at the level of EU Delegations and at that of the Brussels Headquarters. Additionally, there are also constant and close exchanges between the EEAS and the diplomatic services both of the member states and of third countries. Within the remits of this definition of diplomacy *latu senso,* the EU has been profiling itself as an independent diplomatic actor.

In the past, the EU was mainly conducting 'trade diplomacy', a strand of diplomatic engagement that closely reflected the primarily economic drivers of European integration. The Lisbon Treaty introduced significant changes in terms of competences, instruments and structures that provided the EU with important tools to conduct increasingly independent diplomatic activities also in other areas. The EEAS is divided in five large geographical departments: Asia-Pacific, Africa, Europe and Central Asia, the Greater Middle East, and the Americas. Cross-cutting departments include human rights, global and multilateral issues, budget and administration, Common Security and Defence Policy and crisis response, as well as the EU Military Staff. This set-up, mostly organised according to geographical divisions, reflects the historically grown structures of many national foreign ministries. What is more, with the creation of the EEAS, the Commission Delegations abroad were 'transformed' into EU Delegations and became part of the EEAS. They serve as the EU's fully-fledged diplomatic representations to third countries or to multilateral organisations, as their remit was extended to matters related to the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

In 2018, the Service counted 4,169 staff members, of whom 2,048 were working in Brussels and 2,121 in EU Delegations or Offices abroad (EEAS 2018: 12). These 4,169 staff members included 1,575 EU officials and 449 seconded national experts, among other categories. In addition, 3,717 staff members of the Commission were employed in EU Delegations.

The EU Delegations are in charge of coordinating EU positions on the ground and represent the interface with both governmental and non-governmental actors in the host country. They are recognised as fully-fledged diplomatic actors and serve as crucial hubs for information-gathering, which are essential for policy-

making in Brussels. There is also a high degree of local coordination with member states' embassies. EU Delegations also exercise other diplomatic functions similar to those of member states, such as consular protection, always within the limits of the competences defined by the Treaties. International diplomatic law applies, by virtue of the so-called establishment agreements that are concluded with the host country (based on the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations). The principles of 'sincere cooperation' and 'conferral' equally have to be respected by the EU Delegations.

Altogether, the interaction between member states and the EU institutions represents a complex puzzle, which is shaped by both legal aspects and evolving practices. This poses particular challenges for EU diplomats, as set out below.

Challenges and opportunities of an epistemic community

Defining a good diplomat generally poses manifold challenges. It is even more difficult in the case of a 'good *EU* diplomat'. Yet, can we even speak about a genuine EU diplomat that is distinct from our understanding of national diplomats? And, if yes, what makes this diplomat distinct?

Defining the EU diplomat

EU diplomats represent a layer in between member states' diplomacy and the international level. Of the diplomats working in the EEAS, the majority are European civil servants hailing from the Commission. Roughly one third, however, comes from the services of EU member states, where they have been trained to represent the specific interests of their country. When becoming EU diplomats, however, they are bound to represent the Union, a hybrid polity with its own rules and an emerging diplomatic culture. They thus need to possess comprehensive knowledge of this complex and layered landscape and be able to navigate effectively within it.

Drawing on the definition of diplomacy and diplomats proposed by Maurer (2015: 275), we can argue that a good diplomat at the EU level is an expert in terms of rules, procedures and dynamics that are not only those of its member state's diplomatic environment, and not only those of the EU institutions, but also of the other European partners. EU diplomats thus need to be 'process experts': not only because the EU internal structure demands such expertise, but also since this is beneficial given the growing number of actors involved in 21st century diplomacy and its increasing complexity. Multi-disciplinarity is also a central skill for EU diplomats, whose dossiers tend to be increasingly comprehensive and complex. Finally, individual characteristics and skills such as the capacity to listen and empathise and to build relationships of trust – both inside the EU and with non-EU partners – also help define a good EU diplomat.

With the creation of the EEAS, we have witnessed an increasing separation of the European level from the national level in terms of organisational and working culture and of specific interests and policies. New rules, procedures and dynamics are created through both the interaction between the specific legal competences enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty and the *de facto* existing and evolving practices in terms of coordination and policy-making both at Headquarters and in the Delegations. At the same time, the 28 national diplomatic services, their specific recruitment rules, approaches to training, epistemic communities, networks and 'rules of the game' have influenced EU diplomats, and they continue to influence the way EU diplomacy is shaped and conceived.

EU diplomats as an evolving epistemic community

Despite the existence of the EEAS and the evolution of instruments and practices marking the emergence of a distinct EU diplomacy and diplomatic staff, some scholars (e.g. Duquet 2018) and policy-makers still argue that EU diplomats remain mere coordinators of member states' positions and that their diplomatic culture, skills and 'rules of the game' are still mainly defined at the national level.

Considering the above discussion of the EU's diplomatic activities and agents in the context of 21st century diplomacy, it can be argued that the EU has by now laid the foundation for a genuine – still forming and evolving – epistemic community, a true network of professionals with specific competences and expertise, and who have an "authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge" within the domain of EU-level diplomacy (Haas 1992: 3). In order to strengthen this emerging community of EU diplomats, any good EU diplomat, whether posted at Headquarters or in a Delegation, has to possess 'layered' knowledge, in the sense that such knowledge and the related skills should be the result of:

- training;
- experience with the national diplomatic culture and epistemic community at member state level or at the level of the EU institutions;
- regular interaction with civil servants coming from the European Commission and the EEAS as well as from the member states; and
- local interaction with the community and the host government in case of an EU Delegation.

As key component to further develop EU diplomats' knowledge and skills, the concluding section turns to ideas regarding future training needs.

The future of the EU's diplomatic corps

The EU has increasingly become a diplomatic actor *per se* and is in the process of shaping its own diplomatic culture and epistemic community. EU diplomats are emerging as a distinct diplomatic corps in the post-Westphalian diplomatic world. How, then, should the EU continue to shape its own diplomatic culture in order to reinforce this corps of good European Union diplomats? Reinforced training for diplomats is central for four main reasons: it contributes to creating a common management and working culture, both at the Headquarters and Delegations level, for EU diplomats and other officials alike; it is instrumental to the promotion of EU interests and values; it can help investing in joint ownership; and it facilitates the socialisation of EU diplomats.

Given that EU diplomats epitomise the complexity of post-Westphalian diplomacy and the challenges of diplomatic engagement in a hybrid polity, first and foremost it takes more and better-targeted training to build up and make the best use of their pre-existing layered knowledge and skills. The EEAS is in fact increasing its focus on training both in Headquarters and Delegations, where mentoring programmes and peer-to-peer training for newly appointed Heads of Delegation significantly increased in 2018 (EEAS 2018: 15). However, developing both a common management and working culture remains a central challenge. Strengthening the diplomats' knowledge about the complexity of EU structures and decision-making processes will help them understand how they can best inform and represent policy-making in light of the general EU interest. Capitalising on EU knowledge is also instrumental to strengthen the evolving epistemic community of EU diplomats, increasing the awareness about the availability of means and similarity of ends. Therefore, a good EU diplomat should promote the European interest, detaching from those the specific interests, positions and diplomatic cultures of member states while capitalising on the nationally defined or EU institutions-based knowledge to put it 'at the service' of the EU.

Second, training should also aim at creating an essential bridge between the staff coming from the European Commission and the EEAS and the diplomats seconded by member states (Duke 2015), developing a shared working culture, which is distinct from a diplomatic culture as such. Joint training is an effective means of socialisation towards that end.

Third, interaction and training is essential in order to identify possibilities for joint ownership. In fact, such joint ownership is fundamental to ensure a successful and positive relationship with the host government and more effective policy-implementation processes. A good EU diplomat should be able to engage simultaneously with, on the one hand, the EU member states and, on the other hand, the host government and the local actors to build sustainable relationships.

Fourth, training should enable EU diplomats to better grasp the centrality of engaging in interaction where no agreement is foreseen at first, trying to build a relationship of trust even when mandates and goals conflict and therefore do not immediately allow to identify a common goal. Investing in 'no-deal' options can be central in order to get to know the motivations and interests of the other negotiating parties, but also to identify to what extent and in which ways interests are incompatible but similar (hence, leaving space for further negotiations) or entirely contradictory. In fact, the coordination between the EU institutions and the member states can significantly contribute to understanding the specificities and importance of each of the multiple layers contributing to successful diplomatic activities. It is also through investing in negotiations with 'difficult partners', where an agreement is only reached after multiple negotiation rounds, that EU diplomats can build relationships of trust.

All this constitutes an agenda for advancing EU diplomats' training to be implemented. It should focus on developing a more comprehensive and tailored capacity building for EU diplomats that responds to the specific challenges of 21st century diplomacy. This sort of training will be central to further strengthen the creation of an EU epistemic community of diplomats, at the intersection between member states, the EU as a post-Westphalian actor and all the other relevant non-state actors, which increasingly shape and redefine how we conceive diplomacy today.

Further Reading

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This policy brief is loosely inspired by the roundtable "What makes a good (European) diplomat today?" organised by the Department of EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies at the College of Europe in Bruges on 8 October 2019.

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Her previous work experience includes internships at the European External Action Service, where she was working on Egypt, and in a strategic partnership of European NGOs, dealing with humanitarian aid and development cooperation.