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THE EEAS AT 10 AND THE HEADQUARTERS-
DELEGATION NEXUS IN THE EU FOREIGN
POLICY CYCLE THROUGH THE LENSES OF
PRACTICE THEORY: DOES THE WAY TOWARDS
A STRONGER EEAS PASS THROUGH
EMPOWERED DELEGATIONS?

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May 2022

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“The EEAS at 10 and the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus in the EU Foreign Policy Cycle through the lenses of Practice Theory: does the way towards a stronger EEAS pass through empowered Delegations?”

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Abstract

At the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the consequent establishment of fully-fledged EU Delegations (EUDs), this research tries to fill a gap in the academic literature investigating their impact on EU foreign policy making. Drawing inspiration from the recent ‘practice turn’ in EU external action studies, by means of what I have called the ‘Headquarters-Delegations Nexus’ (HDN) - theorised as the system of coordination that allows the exchange of policy inputs between Brussels HQ and EU Delegations- , this paper analyses where things stand at the moment. It also suggests that the case of the HDN could be an example of how practice theory can be put in fruitful conversation with new institutionalist approaches, creating a broader framework accounting for the big picture of EU foreign policy. From the analysis, based on an original dataset of semi-structured interviews with EU officials, emerges that the EUD’s role in the policy cycle evolved: they are now capable of impacting policy-making in its early stages. Finally, as is clear that attempts of reforming the EEAS are being made, I evaluate how this evolution might be the foundation for the EEAS’s transformation into a fully-fledged policy entrepreneur.

Keywords *European Union (EU); European External Action Service (EEAS); Practice Theory; Headquarter – Delegation Nexus (HDN); EU Delegations; High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP).*

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

CARD - Coordinated Annual Review on Defence

CFSP - Common Foreign and Security Policy

DG – EU Commission Directorate General

EDF – European Defence Fund

EEAS – European External Action Service

EU – European Union

EUD – European Union Delegation

EUGS – EU Global Strategy

HDN – Headquarters-Delegation Nexus

HR/VP - High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/ Vice-President
of the Commission

HoD – Head of Delegation

HQ – Headquarters, in this case EEAS headquarters in Brussels

MFA – Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MPCC - Military Planning and Conduct Capability

PESCO - Permanent Structured Cooperation

PO – Political Officer

PSC - Political and Security Committee

Introduction

After ten years from the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the consequent transformation of EU Commission Delegations in third countries into fully-fledged EU Delegations (EUDs), this research aims at evaluating what is their role in European foreign policy, trying to place them in the EU foreign policy cycle. Questions were raised in the academic literature in this last decade, regarding the role of EU Delegations, the tasks they are supposed to perform and their efficiency. One big lack stood out: a missing inquiry on the reality of the impact of Delegations in policy-making, in their coordination with Brussels headquarters (HQ). Specifically, questions regarding whether the added value of having an important – in size- diplomatic service, with 144 Delegations in third countries, was really fully exploited by the EU and its foreign policy apparatus. This research aims at analysing where things stand at the moment, using an approach based on the tenets of practice theory.

This research, after having set the broader context of the EU foreign policy machinery and the role that the EEAS it's supposed to play in it, will focus on the role of EUDs in the policy cycle, analysing what I will call the 'Headquarters-Delegations Nexus' (HDN), through the lenses of practice theory. Briefly, this can be summarized as the system of coordination and communication that allows the exchange of information and policy inputs between Brussels HQ and EU Delegations in third countries.

In Part I, I will outline the basic tenets of practice theory that informed my work, while describing how approaches belonging to the so-called 'practice turn' in EU external action studies can reanimate the debate within the field. Moreover, while drawing some useful insights for the following analysis from new institutionalist approaches, I will suggest how the case of the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus could be an example of how practice theory, by means of a 'sociological leeway', can be put in fruitful conversation with these approaches. If practice theory can illuminate everyday practices in the 'making' of EU foreign policy, likewise its findings – while being generalised- need to be placed in a broader framework accounting for the big picture of EU foreign policy.

Part II, will then be devoted to giving an outlook of the role of the EEAS within the complex and multi-actor system of EU foreign policy. After its establishment 10 years

ago, its role seems to be going beyond that of a coherence-maker, towards being a fully-fledged policy entrepreneur, and EU delegations might have a role in this evolution. Therefore, before moving into Part III, it will be important to set the scene, to then have a clear picture of what will be analysed in the last section.

Part III, will analyse the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus itself, through the practice-oriented analysis of the role of EUDs in the policy cycle. The analysis is based on an original dataset of 11 semi-structured interviews, which findings will shed light on the working practices within an evolving EEAS, in which the role of Delegations might be the foundations for its transformation into a policy entrepreneur; the HDN will be the *locus* for analysing this evolution.

Methodology

Part III is based on an original dataset of 11 qualitative semi-structured interviews, conducted in July 2021. The interviews, given the Covid-19 pandemic situation, were conducted with EU diplomats and EEAS officials online via video conferencing platforms – i.e. Webex or Zoom- or on the phone, also via WhatsApp. The format was a semi-structured interview during at least 30 minutes, with most of them lasting *circa* one hour. Most interviews were recorded, with prior informed consent granted by the interviewee, and whether they were not I relied on my written notes. All interviews were confidential; therefore the results will be presented numbered and dated, with only a general indication of the role of the interviewee and no other information that may break anonymity (i.e. geographical location for diplomats abroad). Interviews, in light of practice theory, were not approached as a mean to ‘extract’ an objective truth, rather as ‘intensive’ and ‘dynamic events’ (Rathbun, 2008; Gusterson, 2008 quoted in Bicchi, 2018:121) constructing meaning, while results interpretation was not guided by “already defined coding rules” (Adler-Nissen, 2016:97). This was in order to “liberate agency (...) from the constrictions of structuralist and systemic models while avoiding the trap of methodological individualism” (Adler-Nissen 2016, quoted in Bicchi & Bremberg, 2016:395).

Part I. EU External Action and Practice Theory

EU External Action and Practice Theory

Theoretically this research on the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus could be ascribed to the so called ‘practice turn’ in EU studies. The use of practice theory, more and more popular in IR and EU external action studies (Adler-Nissen, 2016; Bicchi, 2021), is motivated by its ability to analyse ‘socially meaningful patterns of actions’ (Bicchi & Bremberg, 2016) performed by groups of diplomats and officials, the ‘communities of practice’. Moreover, it seems impractical to use other mainstream IR theories or FPA frameworks to analyse the work of such a small, but at the same time central, diplomatic - and bureaucratic- unit as an EUD, that would benefit from a ‘theoretically closer’ examination. Even if only recently studied as a *per se* theoretical strand we cannot ignore that elements implicitly ascribing to practice theory were present in other schools of european studies, in fact, while advocating for a more ‘explicit’ practice turn, Adler-Nissen (2016) points out at the ‘implicit’ elements of practice theory embedded in previous accounts of european integration in foreign policy, involving socialisation and Europeanisation.

Practice theory allows to analyse “specific forms of human agency residing in communities of like-minded professionals whose repeated, identifiable actions result in practices from which explanatory tools can be derived and conclusions can be generalized” (Economides, 2019). In this research the ‘practice’ object of analysis, through the conduction of semi-structured interviews, will be the repetitive patterns of exchange of policy inputs and policy relevant information between EU Delegations in third countries and EEAS headquarters in Brussels, inside a simplified policy cycle model. The strengths of this approach in analysing this case study are to be found in the possibility to have a more “localized and evidence-based understanding of agency” (Ibid.) offering insights regarding ‘bottom-up’ and ‘top-down’ practices within the empirical reality of EU foreign policy officials (Ekengren, 2018), otherwise invisible from a more ‘theoretically distant’ point of view.

As maintained by Ekengren in his book (2018) advocating for a ‘translocal’ practice turn in EU external action studies, the two main schools in EU foreign policy – using a simplified explanatory dichotomy- the “realism–intergovernmental school” (rationalist) and the “normative–structural power school” (constructivist) are widening their gap with “the empirical reality of EU foreign policy actions” over the years (Ekengren, 2018:2). This is mainly due to limitations residing in their agency-structure analysis: if the first set of theories too often risks falling into structural determinism, denying the role of agency, the second, on the other end of the spectrum tend to ignore the limitations imposed by structure. According to the proponents of practice theories (i.e. Adler-Nissen, 2016; Lequesne, 2016; Ekengren, 2018; Bicchi, 2021) these approaches, by engaging with the practices performed by practitioners involved every day in ‘the making’ of EU foreign policy, have the potential to revitalise a discourse stuck in this dichotomy. Mainly by providing a middle way between the aforementioned set of theories, tackling an “under-theorized agency–structure relationship [that] led to a (...) weak understanding of agency and the political dimensions of EU foreign policy action” (Ekengren, 2018:11). Therefore, combining “objective and subjective facts overcome[ing] the dualism of structure and agency in EU studies” (Ekengren, 2018:14). Moreover, such a perspective allows the scholar to have an idea of the hierarchies present inside the complex and multi-faceted EU foreign policy machinery, characterised by many actors (the Council, the Commission, the HR/VP and EEAS), policies (i.e. CFSP and development ‘Commission’ policies) and interests.

But what does it mean to use ‘practice theory’? In fact, as maintained by Bicchi (2021) practice theory is not a single theoretical approach or body of theories, rather – as described by Bueger & Gadinier (quoted in Bicchi, 2021:5)- is an “heterogenous set of ideas and concepts” with some common commitments: “emphasis of process, practical knowledge, collectivity, materiality, multiplicity (of realities), performativity and empiricity” (Ibid.). My research was inspired by these commitments, as Bourdieu put it, we need to analyse “the freedom of the agent within a framework of possibility” (quoted in Ekengren, 2018:63).

Indeed, most practice approaches are based on a Bourdieusian sociological background and this is not just because of “Bourdieu’s obsession with empirical work, and resolute opposition to armchair theorizing” (Pouliot & Mérand, 2013:25). Bourdieu speaks at

those in IR interested in overcoming the structure-agency dilemma, seeing the two as “theoretically interdependent or mutually implicating entities” (Ibid.). Bourdieu’s relational ontology, thanks to the notion of *habitus*, offers an appetible solution to the structure-agency problem. “The *habitus* is the point of dynamic intersection between structure and action, society and individual (...) convey[ing] this mutually constitutive dialectic that unites agents and structures” (Pouliot & Mérand, 2013:29). Therefore, in the Bourdieusian relational ontology practices are the result of the “encounter between *habitus* and *field*”, this latter being “a social space structured along three principal dimensions: power relations, objects of struggle, and the rules taken for granted within the *field* (Ibid., 30). Actors’ actions shaped by *habitus* intersect with *fields* giving birth to practices. In Bourdieu’s theory of practice a social action is always ‘field-specific’ and allows to access “the systems of sense-making which are inarticulate, and which nonetheless structure world politics” (Pouliot 2008, quoted in Pouliot & Mérand, 2013:32).

Thus, what are ‘practices’, and why is their analysis supposed to reinvigorate EU studies, as maintained by practice theories scholars? “Practices are socially meaningful patterns of action” (Adler and Pouliot, quoted in Bicchi, 2021:3), or ‘competent performances’. More precisely, they are a “a form of action, situated between individual agents and social structures, practices differ from beliefs or preferences (which they express) and from institutions (which they give life to)” (Ibid., 14). Focusing on localised practices, arising in the everyday work of practitioners, helps us in tracing and generalise ‘patterns of action’, that give us insights on a broader issue. For example, Bicchi (2021), exemplifying the issue asks herself ‘who holds the pen’ and who ‘is’ the EEAS – or any other institution- for a particular matter, dealing with a precise policy or action? An advantage offered by practice theory, that will be crucial in my research, is the possibility to analyse *informal* practices performed by actors engaged in ‘doing’ international relations. An easy way to identify what could possibly be analysed as a practice is selecting a “patterned behaviour that emerges as very important in the chosen field of analysis” (Ibid.).

Lequesne highlights how institutions cannot be considered solely as instruments, like we would do from a purely rationalist perspective. “Institutions are human creations that change and evolve through the interests but also the subjective representations of the agency. To understand rule-making, you must start identifying practices” (Lequesne,

2015: 352). Therefore, given the spaces it opens, in terms of generalisation and subsequent analysis of the object studied during fieldwork, I have found practice theory the most suited ‘framework’ in researching EUDs’ practices in EU foreign policy-making. An example in the literature is Ekengren’s ‘practice theory of translocal action’, through which he analyses “EU’s localized practices, i.e. the foreign policy actions of the EU’s representatives in the local environment, as opposed to acts and discourse in Brussels” (Bicchi, 2021:4), to then make sense of the broader picture of EU external action’s nature (Ekengren, 2018).

Studying practices means looking at what agents do and the meanings they attach to actions. When Lequesne conducted the fieldwork for his article (between 2010 and 2013) the EEAS was in the midst of being ‘built from scratches’ and underwent a process of internal organisation. At that time the author wrote that a “nascent institution characterized by the invention of new rules to deal with EU foreign policy” (Lequesne, 205:352) was an optimal case study for a practice approach. Mainly, given the absence of a single rule design and most importantly of a rule designer. Therefore, the case in analysis was a matter of practices performed by agents expanding their social representations of the policy field (Ibid.), *de facto* enabling rules creation. If the ‘mapping of agents’ practices’ used by Lequesne was useful to track the creation of rules in a new-born institution a decade ago, a similarly practice-oriented approach seems well-equipped to analyse the evolution of a particular set of practices, inside a particular bureaucratic unit in the same institution: what I will define as the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus.

Practice Theory and New Institutionalism: a ‘Sociological Leeway’

European foreign policy-making is a process that I believe cannot be explained from a sole theoretical standpoint, necessitating both structural (rationalist) and ideational (constructivist) elements to be explained. Therefore, new institutionalism – with its different strands- seems the theory that frames it more convincingly, importantly for this analysis, also offering a ‘sociological leeway’ to be put in conversation with practice theory. I believe that through the sociological roots of practice theory, these approaches could be put in fruitful conversation, combining elements to better frame the broader explanation of EU integration and foreign policy-making. Moreover, new institutionalism

also offers a middle way between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism, another dichotomy that too often tend to freeze the discourse in an unproductive impasse.

Then, drawing two insights from the new institutionalist (NI) school, especially from two of its strands (Delreux, 2015): sociological institutionalism (SI) and historical institutionalism (HI), practice theory helps keeping together different phenomena arising from the ‘practice’ empirically observed. If the first (SI) accounts for the degree of socialisation involved in European integration and EU foreign policy making, insights from the second (HI) may help in understanding the path-dependent elements derived from a particular institutional setting, that still influence agents’ practices. Indeed, the point is again finding the right balance -or a middle-way explanation- between agency and structure. Therefore, combining practice theory with these two elements we have a theoretical framework with a convincing leeway for a deeper analysis of the agency-structure problem. As said, Adler-Nissen (2016) recognised that some of practice theories’ elements were implicitly embedded in analysis of socialisation while Jenson & Mérand (2010), analysing the relation between institutionalism and sociology, and advocating for a fruitful debate between the two, highlighted some points of contact. According to them “sociological approaches to the European Union (...) can find a natural home within neo-institutionalism” while “institutional approaches to the EU would greatly benefit from a dose of sociological thinking” (Jenson & Mérand, 2010:74). Searching for a satisfying solution to the agency-structure ‘balance’ they maintain that “it is possible to pay attention to social relations, agency and power without ignoring formal institutional developments” (Ibid., 82).

“Institutions need to be seen as being built through social processes rather than merely by rational intention or mechanical reproduction (...) they must be treated as products of action through time, and not simply as constraints or payoff matrices. An institution can be a set of formal rules and informal norms that persists through time, but it is also always a pattern of social relations, which can be competitive, oppositional and characterized by unequal power relations” (Ibid.).

In their call to ‘bring back the actors’ into new institutionalism the authors suggest “thinking like a sociologist (...) examining the practices of actors (...) locating the real

spaces in which ‘European’ practice occurs” (Ibid., 85). In the end, sociological approaches – in the case of practice theory belonging to the Bourdieusian school- provide a leeway to “reanimate the structure-agency debate in neo-institutionalism” (Ibid: 83).

This means that, even if the institutionalist school, by “examining the role, function and design of institutions in EU foreign policy-making”, focuses on “why and how institutions are created (...) and on how institutions affect policy-making and policy makers” (Delreux, 2015:156), treating them in turn as both independent and dependent variables, we can draw two useful insights for this research. These in turn, help me framing this analysis in the broader discourse of European foreign policy making; without committing completely to institutionalism and risking structural determinism and, most importantly, offering a good depiction of the institutional framework in which the practices object of study happen.

Ultimately, these two elements create a broader framework in which embedding practice theory’s ‘from below’ perspective with its ‘empirical’ added-value. This in turn results in the ability of integrating ‘first-hand’ information on – especially *informal*- practices and social relationships that complement our understanding of the broader picture of European foreign policy-making. The institutionalist framework is needed to ‘draw the lines’ around the practices analysed, meaning to situating them in the broader institutional setting of the EEAS, a ‘young’ institution with given rules and practices, but that at the micro-level of EUDs, heavily relies on informal practices and personal–individual relations.

As a result, I believe that a practice theory approach, beyond explaining the ‘everyday of EU foreign policy-making’, could also help in explaining how institutional settings influence agents’ action avoiding structural determinism, while also possibly accounting for changes in structures shaped by agency, like institutional developments ‘in the making’. For example, as we will see, from this research emerges that: the Covid-19 pandemic and recent attempts of reforming the Service introduced new communication and coordination practices between Brussels HQ and EUDs, that many interviewee see as positive developments. These are clearly derived from actor’s agency responding to the unprecedented pandemic situation, within the actual institutional setting, and even if we cannot exclude that in the long run these practices may be formalised or

institutionalised, practice theory helps us in investigating these changes while they are occurring (Bicchi, 2021).

Practice Theory and the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus

To sum up, researching the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus as a ‘codified phenomena’ through practice theory, the aim of this research will be twofold: analysing from this perspective the state of the art of EUDs’ working practices in coordinating with Brussels HQ; tracing EUDs’ work into the policy cycle, filling a gap in the EU and EEAS literature. While also trying to generalise some broader conclusions on the role of the EEAS in the EU foreign policy machinery and tracking its evolution over the last decade (2011-2021), keeping an eye on emerging trends and how they may impact overall coherence in EU foreign policy.

Regarding this last point the insights collected on the ‘Headquarters-Delegation Nexus’ could help in reflecting on different level of analysis – and ‘tensions’- in the EU foreign policy apparatus and EU foreign policy as a whole. Indeed, reflecting on the EEAS and its role in foreign policy-making means to interrogate ourselves on coherence: vertical and especially horizontal and external (Smith, 2014). More than once while conducting interviews arose the consideration that infra-institutional coherence is an issue, that pushed by an institutional design fruit of “too many institutional compromises” (interview n.7), leads to external incoherence. Here the new institutionalist insights resonate, as we see foreign policy-making practices being influenced by a path dependent institutional setting, in its turn being challenged by those same practices emerging from the socialisation involved in policy-making, over time increasing the *sui generis* nature of European institutions.

Lequesne in his article analysing the EEAS through practice theory (2015) acknowledges that most of the literature regarding the EEAS - a lot of ink was spilled in the first years after its establishment- “assess how this new institution can potentially solve recurrent questions about EU foreign policy to best ensure consistency, coherence, and the reduction of transaction costs between multiple actors” (2015: 352). Now, a decade later, this debate goes on (Blockmans & Wessel, 2021), and this ‘bottom-up’ analysis of such

under researched - likewise central- bureaucratic units like EUDs, cannot refrain from joining the broader debate on the EEAS and on the issue of coherence in EU foreign policy-making as a whole. Indeed, far from producing practical knowledge as an end in itself, practice theory helps examining the big picture by means of a bottom-up and more empirically accurate approach, by “focusing on the everyday activities at the local level” (Bicchi, 2021:2).

Part II. The EEAS at 10 and the Evolving Role of EU Delegations

To trace the EEAS institutional development and role in the EU foreign policy-making system we need to evaluate, after a decade, what is “the ability of its agents to contribute original ideas to the EU agenda” (Lequesne, 2015). As their action is set within a complex multi-level governance system, which Lequesne’s practice theory study (2015) described as lacking a clear hierarchy, even in the CSFP realm where “the principal decision-maker continues to be the Council” (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska quoted in Lequesne, 2015: 362). Tracing the Service’s performances as an agenda-setter, its perceived leadership and ultimately its ability to act as a policy-entrepreneur will be crucial to assess its development. In this absence of hierarchy and with the problems that plagued its early years - i.e. the lacking *esprit de corps* (Juncos & Pomorska, 2014) and member states resistance to the Service’s prerogatives (Pomorska & Vanhoonacker, 2015)- as noted by Lequesne (2015), it was difficult for the service to emerge as an agenda-setter. On the other hand, it is also true that this lack of clearly defined hierarchies, over the years, let room for manoeuvre when the Service was ready for taking the initiative. “They [EEAS agents] are not any more or less able than other EU agents to generate ideas on foreign policy issues and to seize opportunities” (Ibid., 362). If, “in accordance with the non-hierarchical practice”, until 2015 “EEAS agents [were] able to produce ideas as long as they remain[ed] issue-specific and short term [and] they [were] not in a position to produce strategic ideas on the future of EU foreign policy” (Lequesne, 2015: 362), things might have changed as we will see in this section. Mainly, because of a more assertive position taken by the HR/VP, whose weak leadership was limiting the Service’s development over the first years.

Therefore, in this second section after a brief account of the EEAS history, after having analysed its place into the complex EU foreign policy machinery, and having outlined its competences and tasks, I will trace its institutional development, that seems to be heading to the role of a fully-fledged policy entrepreneur. Then, in the last part of this section, I will introduce EU Delegations into the big picture, setting the basis for the analysis of Part III. The following analysis of the EEAS will revolve around three themes, namely: EEAS relative position inside the EU foreign policy machinery – i.e. relations with others

EU foreign policy stakeholders-, the tasks that Service is supposed to perform and lastly its perceived – and potential- leadership role.

The European External Action Service was established with the Lisbon treaty, coming into force in December 2009, but the Service, which establishment could be described as the “most ambitious reform effort in European foreign policy ever” (Lehne, 2011 quoted in Juncos & Pomorska, 2015:238) took years to be ‘established from scratch’ (Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013). The first years of the service were marked by HR/VP Ashton’s efforts of ‘capacity building’ (Ibid.) and internal organisation that diverted resources from the objective of being an effective agenda-setter, resulting in the EEAS being initially ‘met with suspicion’ by the other stakeholders in the EU foreign policy system: the Commission, the Council and Member States (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015). Lacking budget, staffing and *esprit de corps* it was too early for the HR/VP and EEAS to become “fully fledged foreign policy entrepreneurs” (Vanhoonacker & Pomorska, 2013:1329). The next fundamental step in its development was the ‘Council Decision 2010/427/EU establishing the organisation and functioning of the European External Action Service’ (Council of the EU, 2010), which details its organisation and further specifies its functions. In fact, the Lisbon treaty itself “did not provide any detailed guidelines about the composition and functioning of the new organization” (Juncos & Pomorska, 2010: 238).

The Service’s Tasks

In the 2010 Council Decision, three main things stand out reading the first articles, helping us framing this new institution and its competences: the first being its autonomy. The EEAS is established as a “functionally autonomous body of the Union under the authority of the High Representative” (Article 1). Then, its role as a ‘cohesion-maker’: “the Union will ensure consistency” (Article 2) with the High Representative that - assisted by the EEAS- will support the Council and the Commission. More importantly, while reiterating the Service’s aim of coherence-building, article 3 outlines the EEAS’ broader tasks, mainly by stating that “the EEAS will support the High Representative” (Council of the EU, 2010) in all of his/her institutional roles.

Therefore, as noted by the ‘EEAS 2.0 Task Force’ report (CEPS, 2021): the EEAS’s role in the EU foreign policy system has “never been clearly stated. Its purpose may only be deduced indirectly from the complex mandate assigned to the HRVP it is intended to assist [and the] 2010 Council Decision was drafted as an administrative charter rather than as a mission statement (...) stop[ing] short of articulating its political mandate”. (Ibid., 4). Therefore, emerges that the EEAS was thought as an independent body which primary task was to assist the HR/VP in ensuring coherence between the different EU institutions and policies in the realm of EU external action, while assisting him/her in formulating and conducting the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

After nearly two years, and the efforts of HR/VP Ashton, the Service finally became fully operational in January 2011. After its troubled birth, the first years were not the easiest for the new-born institution, having to face both the Arab Springs and the Eurozone crisis (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015). If in 2013 after the first review “the EEAS ha[d] yet to find its institutional space in Brussels, or fully gain the confidence of the Member States” (Duke, 2014:24) resulting in “several duplicating layers of management, unclear hierarchy in terms of chain of command and opaque relationships between different departments” (Duke, 2014:33); After 10 years seems that, one of the main tasks of the EEAS remains to ensure coherence in the Union’s policies. As reflected in Secretary General Stefano Sannino’s words, when recently interviewed in an event for the 10th anniversary of the service: “there are 27 Member States, with 27 different sovereign governments, histories and interests. We [the EEAS] need to reconcile them. The mission of the EEAS (...) is create[ing] the ground on which we are walking” (EUI, 2021). Indeed, is clear that this ‘reconciling role’, building coherence between the different stakeholders, remains central in the EEAS agenda. Ultimately, the ‘EEAS 2.0 Task Force’ report (CEPS, 2021) points out how over the years a decision over the nature of the EEAS itself was always avoided: should the Service act as an autonomous MFA? A ‘mere Secretariat General’ fostering coherence? Or a policy planning unit? “For want of a decision, the European diplomatic service ended up incorporating the EU’s procedural intricacies that its establishment was meant partly to overcome” (Ibid., 4).

The EEAS in the EU Foreign Policy Machinery

Regarding the EEAS position in the EU foreign policy machinery, given what was defined its ‘interstitial nature’ - “an organization emerging in interstices between various organizational fields and recombining (...) financial, legal and legitimacy resources stemming from organizations belonging to these different organizational field” (Batora, 2013:598) – the other stakeholders were unsurprisingly afraid of a possible loss of competences, prestige or power in policy-making. As maintained by Former Deputy Secretary General (2016-2020) Christian Leffler:

“The environment in which the EEAS was created was quite unwelcoming (...) other institutions felt they could perfectly do the job the EEAS was set to do. Setting it up was a big challenge, finding space and building trust with the other institutions, mainly the Commission and Council Secretariat (...) we’ve come a very long way, a lot of that has been built, cooperation is a lot smoother” (EEAS, 2021a).

Initially, this situation created “different and sometimes conflicting sets of expectations in relation to the Service from actors within the organization as well as from outside” (Batora, 2013:599). Indeed, “the lack of clarity over its institutional status and structure, provided good grounds for intergovernmental bargaining and turf wars inside the Brussels system” (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015:239). Moreover, as highlighted by Balfour and Raik (2013), a paradox arose: Member States wanted to retain national control over foreign policy while at the same time demanding more leadership and guidance by the HR/VP and the EEAS. This, as we will see in Part III, is also partly reflected these days in the daily work of Delegations: there’s an increasingly demand of work expected from them, even if Member States keep funding their foreign policies. In terms of inter-institutional coordination, relations with the Commission were problematic from the start, mainly because of the overlapping competences, and overall this impacted on coherence. The commission “fought strongly to retain its competences in areas of development and neighbourhood policy. Eventually, the EEAS was given a role in programming, which, however, was to be carried out under the authority of the Commissioner for Development” (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015:44). This structural issues remain today: the

“do more for less approach is problematic” – “between growing expectations in terms of delivery and constant requests to make savings” (CEPS, 2021:19)- this is due to the fact that “the Commission manages the operational budget of the EEAS” while this last “only administers a very limited part of the budget allocated for foreign policy” (Ibid.). Nevertheless, it could be said that the EEAS being “structurally connected to key EU foreign policy actors (...) operates as the *trait d’union* between those players, including member states, and between policy frameworks, from the CFSP to other EU policy areas with an international dimension” (CEPS, 2021:5).

This institutional setting was not the only thing making the Service an ‘ambiguous’ institution without a clear mandate, as maintained by Batora (2013) other three elements played a role: staff composition, the blending of different expertise (mainly defence and diplomacy) and “the role of the EEAS in representing the entire EU in diplomatic relations with third countries” (Ibid., 609). This last point could be framed as a problem-solving strategy tackling external inconsistency, but as highlighted by Adler-Nissen (2012) “the EEAS is not so much dependent on the recognition of its role by third country governments as it is dependent on the recognition by the governments and diplomatic services of the Member States” (quoted in Batora, 2013:609).

EEAS Leadership Through the Years

However, the focal point of this analysis, tracing the development of the EEAS over this decade must be its ‘role’, its perceived status in the EU foreign policy-making system and its capacity to proactively steer European foreign policy, in other words its capacity of being – and presenting himself- as an effective policy entrepreneur. “Trust within and in the Service has been in rather short supply over the first ten years of the EEAS’ existence” (Blockmans & Wessel, 2021:8) and this was mainly caused by three motives. First, the three-way composition in terms of staffing, second: the insistence on ‘budget neutrality’ that resulted in a lasting lack of resources in terms of both budget and expertise increasing a ‘perceived expectation-capabilities gap’. Lastly, the longstanding of different ‘silos’ and working cultures, resulting in intra-institutional incoherence. Indeed, as it was noted, to achieve the tasks it is expected to perform the EEAS “hinges on recognition, trust and cooperation from other EU protagonists, particularly the Commission and the Member

States, as well as from external partners” (Ibid.). Therefore, after its establishment Service, big expectations were hampered by the “unpropitious circumstances when the EEAS was created” (Ibid.).

Some of the elements that halted the EEAS expectations are to be found in its design and staffing, “while relations on the lower levels of the institutional hierarchy are mostly smooth, the problems arise higher in the structure” (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, 2013:1324), between the HR/VP chairing the External Relations Group and the other commissioners. Regarding staffing, the staff was to be drawn from three institutions: at least a third from the national diplomatic services, at least 60 per cent of officials from EU institutions and the General Secretariat of the Council. This faults in design resulted in a lacking *esprit de corps* and difficult coexistence of different working cultures (Juncos & Pomorska, 2014). As a result, during the Service’s first years complaints emerged “about the lack of initiative and leadership shown by the EEAS” (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, 2013 quoted in Juncos & Pomorska, 2015:243). Overall, there was a diffused opinion – especially in the Commission- that wanted the EEAS as “a weak agenda manager and that dossiers occasionally ‘g[o]t lost’ in the highest levels of the hierarchy” (Ibid.).

After having set the scene, the Service’s birth and its initial problems halting its potential role as a policy entrepreneur, how has the situation evolved until today? Over the last decade “the organization chart has been adapted progressively to remedy some of the EEAS’ design flaws (...) rules and practices have been developed to foster trust *within* and (...) and *in* the Service”, as a result “the EEAS has come a long way in gaining trust from its staff” (Blockman & Wessel, 2021:8). It is therefore fair to say that “the Service has gained some ground in cultivating a sentiment of reliability, credibility and usefulness” (Blockman & Wessel, 2021:9), but is it slowly transforming into a potential policy entrepreneur?

As argued by Morillas, even from an intergovernmentalist perspective, the HR/VP and the EEAS over the last years have gained more autonomy, to back up his thesis the author takes as an example the formulation and the drafting of the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS). If the external dimension of the strategy is to create a narrative and fostering a ‘strategic culture’, it is interesting how, according to the author, this document also serves

as an ‘autobiography’ (Morillas, 2020). Meaning that, its existence reflects the internal conditions necessary for its drafting, if its true that “the policy-making processes of strategies can be considered as important as (their) outcome” (Mogherini, 2015 quoted in Morillas 2020:232), the Global Strategy testifies how these *de novo bodies* – the HR/VP and EEAS- were able to “set policy priorities and exert leadership” (Morillas, 2020:234). These ‘agenda-setting prerogatives’ could be seen as a first hint to the fact that the HR/VP and the EEAS are progressively becoming policy entrepreneurs, in areas previously reserved to member states and the Commission (Ibid.). Ultimately, the HR/VP and EEAS “have gained autonomy (...) through their initiative in external action” (Morillas, 2020:241).

Blockmans and Wessel (2021) in their introduction to the *European Foreign Affairs Review* issue devoted to the 10th anniversary of the EEAS depict a good perspective of the evolution of the Service over the last decade, maintaining that: the Service “has developed into the ‘foreign affairs hub’ that it was intended to be (...) earn[ing] its space as a coherence-build[er]” (Blockmans & Wessel, 2021: 11). Moreover, they also highlight that in spite of the initial concerns, “the various ‘hats’ the High Representative wears – its different institutional roles- (...) have proven to work quite well in practice” assuring “both a good overall working relationship with the Commission and with the Council” (Ibid.).

Aggestam and Johansson (2017), blending sociological institutionalism and role theory, analysed what they called the ‘leadership paradox in EU foreign policy’. According to their research a paradox existed between “a demand for effective EU leadership to address collective action problems, and leadership legitimacy” (Ibid: 1216). Their empirical investigation, that focused on the *de novo bodies* created by the Lisbon Treaty, “identified a significant divergence between the role perceptions of EU Member States and EEAS officials regarding what kind of leadership the HR is expected to perform” (Ibid., 1217). Unsurprisingly, if the Member States saw the HR/VP and EEAS mainly as representative roles, EEAS officials thought that “they should play a role in delivering proposals that shape EU foreign policy-making” (Ibid.). But even in relation to the perceived leadership role the situation seems to have improved in recent years, as a result of a more proactive role played by the last HR/VPs. As maintained by Sus in her 2021 article, HR/VP Mogherini’s agency was fundamental for what followed 2016: the implementation of

different instruments – CARD, MPCC, PESCO, EDF- that was described as an ‘unprecedented’ improvement in EU foreign policy (Sus, 2021). Sus, by applying a multiple streams approach, within an “institutionalist perspective that emphasizes the agency of individuals within broader structures” (Ibid., 824), was able to trace the impact of Mogherini’s leadership. In particular, to analyse how the HR/VP, by exploiting windows of opportunity, successfully acted as a policy entrepreneur between 2014 and 2016 while working to draft and implement the EUGS. The study highlights that, given her ‘inter-institutional position’, “the HR, by acting as a policy entrepreneur, can affect policy change despite the formal constraints on this office” (Ibid., 839).

In the end, even if “the work of the EEAS often remains less visible (...) the EEAS seems to have proven its value by improving coherence in the ‘back-office’ of the Union’s external action” (Blockmans & Wessel, 2021: 11). The possibility of having a proactive and effective High Representative is fundamental to analyse the EEAS potential development into a policy entrepreneur: indeed, its potential to steer EU foreign policy relies mainly on the capacity of the HR/VP to be heard from the Council (Interview n.10).

As also noted in the ‘EEAS 2.0 Task Force’ report (CEPS, 2021) –eloquently titled “From self-doubt to self-assurance”- the EEAS “has the potential to operate as a ‘factory of ideas’, exerting thought-leadership”, in the whole EU foreign policy spectrum, by “articulat[ing] the cognitive input to stimulate a more audacious use of the High Representative’s right of initiative” (CEPS, 2021:8). This, other than requiring a closer collaboration with the Commission -with the HR/VP acting as ‘bridge’ between the two institutions- would entail leveraging the added-value given by the network of 144 EU Delegations in third countries, by giving them a more proactive role in policy-making, arguably producing stronger policies and fostering coherence.

But what’s the status of EUDs nowadays, their role in EU foreign policy? During their first years seemed that their potentially influent role in “information gathering and processing (independent of the member states)” (Vanhoonacker and Pomorska 2013: 1322) remained largely unused, specifically in terms of policy input, agenda setting and policy formulation. As noted by Duke (2014:14), “there is a need to reflect upon the role of the Delegations in shaping policy options in the headquarters by means of reporting

and analysis”. Is, over a decade, the role of Delegations in the policy cycle evolved with the EEAS, or still EUDs’ reports get lost in Brussels?

Part III. EU Delegations in the Policy Cycle: the Headquarters-Delegation Nexus

“I was called by Catherine Ashton, I was told that I would be the first EU Head of Delegation in Lebanon (...) that is when we could all start using properly the title of Ambassador”, Managing Director Angelina Eichhorst (EEAS, 2021b).

Another major change occurred with the entry into force of the Lisbon treaty in the realm of EU foreign policy: the already existing network of Commission Delegations was transformed into a network of fully-fledged EU Delegations – at the moment 144- now representing the whole Union (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015). EU Delegations are part of the EEAS, its “eyes and ears on the ground” (Interview n.2), and are at the heart of this research. In Part III I will present the findings resulting from an original dataset of 11 semi-structured interviews, trying to understand what the state of the art of EUDs is, in relation to their position in the foreign policy cycle, especially looking at their coordination with Brussels headquarters. The aim is understanding if, given the evolution that the Service as a whole underwent in this 10 years, they are now an active part of policy-making. If initially the emergence of EU Delegations might have been met with ‘suspicion and mistrust’ now they represent “the first port of call for many stakeholders in the field [being] instrumental in providing unity in external representation (...) improving the perception of the EU around the world, in spite of a decade of crises that have battered the Union’s image” (Blockmans & Wessels, 2021:9).

Recalling what said in Part I, Jenson and Mérand remind us that: “an institution can be a set of formal rules and informal norms that persists through time, but it is also always a pattern of social relations” (2010: 82). Therefore, this analysis is inspired by practice theory, identifying the ‘Headquarters-Delegation Nexus’ as the *locus* in which agents’ practices – ‘socially meaningful patterns of action’-, take place. Moreover, as I will expose, even in the “the most densely institutionalized international organization in the world” (Pollack, 2004, quoted in Jenson & Mérand, 2010:86) informal practices matter.

The analysis will proceed as follows: firstly I will define the ‘Headquarters-Delegation Nexus’ (HDN) through the lenses of practice theory, then I will present what emerges

from the interviews on the EUDs role in the EU foreign policy cycle to then briefly discuss an emerging project of reform enacted by the New Secretary General Sannino and its potential impact on EUDs, the EEAS and the overall EU external action coherence.

The Headquarters-Delegation Nexus

I define the HDN as: the system of exchanges between Brussels headquarters and EU Delegations in third countries. Characterized by a semi-structured, semi-formalized and bidirectional flow of information and policy/political inputs, resulting in a certain degree of autonomy for the Delegation. This autonomy, or room for manoeuvre, on an ideal-typical continuum, could range from a situation of centralised top-down dominance to a situation in which the Delegation – especially the Head of Delegation- has a certain degree of initiative in policy making.

This definition allows me to highlight one relevant points emerging from this analysis: the nature and frequency of exchanges between the two actors. I have defined this as a ‘semi-structured and semi-formalized’ system, given the role played by informal and personal contacts and the frequent use of ‘informal’ means of communication between officials in headquarters and EUDs. In fact, many interviewees reported that along with more structured and formalised meetings, held monthly or weekly, a lot of coordination is obtained with daily informal contacts via email or phone.

I have also defined the exchange between HQs and EUDs as ‘bidirectional’ in the sense that, besides the flow of information that clearly flows in both directions, even the push for policy initiative proceeds bilaterally. But, the degree to which EUDs are allowed to have an impact on policies depends on the degree of autonomy they have gained as the result of the HDN itself.

Besides the vast activity of “weekly or biweekly” (Interview n.5) reporting, “showing our views and reaching [up to] 60 colleagues in different divisions, from the regional to the horizontal ones, i.e. human rights” (Interview n.7), EU Delegations communicate with Brussels headquarters “at different levels and with a varying frequency” (Interview n.11), with the ‘first port’ being the Head of Unit and the desk officer with whom “we have a constant exchange of views, on a daily basis” (Interview n.5). The most structured

approach that I have found, and this changes from Delegation to Delegation, presented three different types of exchanges occurring weekly: an ‘interservice meeting’ with the Delegation liaising with EEAS desk officers for the country – “every country has a desk in Brussels” (Interview n.4)- and for the region, other EEAS ‘horizontal units’ and Commission staff from the DGs interested in the country. As recalled by an EUD political officer (Interview n.6) this practice was “set up by a colleague”, and was then replicated by other EUDs in the region. Interestingly, representing how, an informal practice arising from agents’ actions, was later replicated in a sort of ‘spillover of good practices’, demonstrating how institutional practices in the EEAS emerge from officials’ agency. Then, the second type of exchange between HQ and EUDs is a weekly call with the Managing Director for the geographical division and all the HoDs for the region, another recent practice emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic: “I am [as an HoD] more involved in reflections on the regional and continental level, whereas before we had exchanges of notes or we were summoned in Brussels once or twice a year to discuss (...) now the approach is more structured (...) almost weekly I have opportunities of exchange that are reflected in an input that is considered [in the HQ]” (Interview n.2). Lastly, the third occasion is a “more private meeting” involving the HoD and Head of the Political Section on the EUD side and the Head of Section and desk officer in Brussels, where more recent and delicate developments are discussed (Interview n.6). Then, in addition to these ‘structured’ - even if informal- meetings, most interviewees report of a daily and dense exchange of personal emails and calls with HQ counterparts, raising the issue of lacking secure communications -“sometimes I have to use my private phone” (Interview n.6)-, linked to the lack of resources lamented by all HoDs.

A first consideration is that the pandemic situation changed the HDN: “the covid crises turned into an opportunity in this sense” (Interview n.2), it “had a good impact on our relationship with the headquarters, we now use videoconferencing more easily, our relationship with our division improved (...) the number of contacts with the HQs improved” (Interview n.1).

EU Delegations in the Policy Cycle

“I believe that we both work in implementation, mostly, but there’s also an important role we play in policy formulation (...) certain countries are under stricter control from the HQ and Member States themselves (...) but there’s always room for the Delegation to shape and influence policies having the direct knowledge of the situation in the country” (Interview n.9).

To trace EUDs’ role in policy-making I will rely on a simplified version of the policy cycle in 4 stage, as described by Carta (2013). The choice is motivated by clarity, both in conducting interviews - and in the following coding process- and for clarity in exposing the research outcomes. This model comprehends: 1. Policy initiative; 2. Policy formulation; 3. Decision-making; 4. Policy implementation. Indeed, one of the questions posed in interviews regarded whether the interviewee saw EUDs as solely part of policy implementation or also playing a role in policy formulation; the vast majority of interviewees responded that, by means of reporting and communications, the role of EUDs, primarily conceived as implementation actors on the ground, is increasingly relevant also in the early stages of the cycle: policy initiative and formulation. “There has been an evolution in the role of EUDs, that are now more and more involved in the early stages of policy formulation rather than only being implementing actors of policies defined in a centralized way in Brussels” (Interview n.2). Coding from the interviews, I was able to identify two main factors affecting the scope and impact of EUDs in policy-making: ‘political salience’ and ‘personal-individual factors’.

“The room for manoeuvre for proposing policies for us here is substantial, in terms of policy input and formulation. We are able to impact on the policies on this country (...) on drafting conclusion, statements and on how to coordinate with other international actors here and at the regional level (...) it’s not always like this. This is not a priority country or one under the spotlight in the European debate, so there’s more space for us in the Delegation to be more proactive” (Interview n.7).

Emerges clearly that the first criteria that enables the Delegation to impact the early stages of the policy cycle is ‘political salience’: when the Delegation is not under the spotlight there’s more room for manoeuvre. Therefore, if the EUD is a low-salience country it is easier to shape policy-making:

“if you are in a country which is every day in the media because of a very acute crisis this is probably the case [where policy-making is HQ directed] ... if you are in a country that (...) is in a more quiet situation then the HoD has a much bigger margin of manoeuvre, because usually HQs, the hierarchy, are focused on situations that are top political priorities at the moment (...) and you are more free to give indications to Brussels and more likely to be listened” (Interview n.4).

Moreover, geographical factors count too: “after Lisbon (...) there has been some opening for EUDs to participate more in policy formulation and policy-making (...) generally the further you get from Europe the more margin of manoeuvre you have (...) neighbourhood Delegations get a lot more attention. But the relationship has changed, is not that top-down as it used to be” (Interview n.8). The ‘personal-individual factors’ seems to count too: how the HoD and Head of the Political Section are perceived in Brussels (Interview n.11).

“The quality of leadership perception counts: at both HoD and Head of Section level (...) If there’s a competent Head of Section that takes the initiative the HQs don’t have any reason to stop him (...) unless it’s a more sensible policy and in that case the lead is directly taken from the HQs. in the other 90% of the time the policy initiative can come from an HoD, desk officer or Head of Section... but there’s no standard” (Interview n.7).

These findings seem to confirm what emerged from Carta’s (2013) analysis of the EEAS in the policy cycle even at the EUD level: “a high degree of discretion contributes to shaping the final outcome of the policy process (...) much coordination occurs informally and is sustained by a variable blend of personal relations and individual initiatives” (Carta, 2013:102). The added value of involving EUDs in policy-making is clear, “we

have the possibility to be in contact with stakeholders on the ground” (Interview n.2), with both governmental and non-governmental actors, “that are often the most important, and only us on the ground can provide that” (Interview n. 3). Circumstances of policy initiative of course can vary: “sometimes we issue reports because we think there’s a problem, sometimes responding to requests coming from the different working groups in the HQ” (Interview n.3), but “sometimes it’s difficult to evaluate the follow-up of the report. With our division we have a weekly video conference in which we discuss the reports that we send (...) but that’s just the beginning of the chain of decisions that are taken by the HQ” (Interview n.1).

Ultimately, the degree of autonomy and capacity of formulating policy proposals depends mainly on two factors: salience of the third country’s political situation and perceived leadership of the top EEAS staff present. Both HoDs and political officers feel that they experienced more room for manoeuvre, in terms of political and policy inputs, in mid-sized Delegations that are not on the political radar of the headquarters. “If you are in Syria or in a country not necessarily in a crisis but of ‘top-concern’, like Russia or Turkey, there are always issues that require a continuous coordination with all the Member States at the Brussels level (...) work is directed from Brussels and the Delegation has the role of feeding the HQ with analysis and information” told an HoD (Interview n.4). On the other hand, in low-priority countries “hierarchies of the EEAS will look at the country maybe once a month to see how’s the situation, this means that the HoD and colleagues have more possibilities and counts more in the county” (Ibid.).

The new Secretary General’s Reform

The attention on EU Delegations has certainly increased after the appointment of new Secretary General Stefano Sannino in January 2021, whom, speaking at an event for the 10th anniversary of the EEAS, when interrogated on the service’s achievement over its first decade, stated that the most important development:

“is our presence on the ground, our Delegations and our missions and operations and what they have managed to become in these 10 years. Moving from [being] a tool to enhance trade and development cooperation, into being foreign policy actors on the ground, enhancing stability, security and creating

the conditions for development cooperation. If I have to mention one [achievement] is the creation of a network [of EUDs] with a presence on the ground” (EUI, 2021).

Former Deputy Secretary General Christian Leffler seems to hold the same opinion: EUDs are the “big success story which is often overlooked (...) they have become the focal point to which Member States and the host country turn. So that the EU has a much clearer profile abroad” (EEAS, 2021a). This said, one of the questions posed to the interviewees concerned their view on the new secretary general’s effort to reform the Service -“I don’t know whether we can speak about a ‘reform’ (...) is more a *reorganisation* of the work and the way [in which] the Delegations works together with the headquarters” (Interview n.4)-, that keeps into high regard the role of Delegations.

A clear example of what this attempt implies lies in the new guidelines for reporting, in addition to the standard three part report, “the new Secretary General suggested to include a fourth part including more concrete ‘suggested actions’, rather than leaving to the HQ the task to traduce into policy a political report (...) so the Delegation takes mores responsibility” (Interview n.1). Other efforts include: the launch of an internal review by mean of “questionnaires and consultations to hear from the Delegations” (Interview n.2) - i.e. an HoD told that he “had the opportunity to have a call with the Secretary General, organised to have the point of view from EUDs” (Interview n.1)- and a “working group addressing this issue [the relationship between HQ and EUDs]” (Ibid.).

Overall, interviewees agree that over the last 10 years the role of Delegations has changed and these are now more “central”, “listened” and “more is expected from them” (Interviews n.3, 5, 4). However, more than one person, notably most experienced HoDs, while welcoming this effort of reforming the EEAS giving a more proactive and central role to EUDs in the policy cycle, expressed concerns regarding the long-term effectiveness of such a reform:

“the role of the EEAS as a whole has to be [re]considered, and that’s the spirit of Sannino’s reform. Sometimes you might have the impression that we are working more to please Member States ensuring coordination and a minimum common denominator, rather than pushing ahead objectives and interest that

we really consider important on the basis of a strong argument. This is intrinsically in the nature of the service” (Interview n.4).

Other than a reconsideration of the role of the EEAS the other issue frequently raised is the lack of resources: “if the objective [of the reform] is to have a more coherent and effective system, therefore we need additional resources (...) at the moment good synergies between EUDs and HQs compensate this gap” (Interview n.2). Interestingly, this point was also made by another HoD, revealing once again the importance of the ‘personal-individual factors’: “if you, in both HQ and Delegation, have people who are committed and motivated to work together maybe you don’t really need a big reform or reorganisation, after all people make the institutions” (Interview n.4).

At the moment it seems that the role of EUDs is indeed evolving towards being more proactive and central in the policy cycle, thanks to bottom-up pushes emerging from the practice and a renewed interest from the hierarchies, but, if a reform in this sense seems to be welcomed, resources and staffing represent at the moment the biggest obstacle:

“there is an increased request of services from Member States and HQ (...) for the EEAS and EUDs (...) we need to know about the environment and cybersecurity and, especially the EUDs, suffer from the lack of EEAS ‘technical’ staff. The ‘whole Delegation approach’ still a lot rhetoric (...) we don’t have any [EEAS] ‘sectorial’ staff [i.e. expert on technical policy issues] here we often rely on the free-time of the already busy commission staff. And that’s not enough” (Interview n.7).

Moreover, a paradox arises: “if you want an EU foreign policy that lives up to the requests/demands, you need the necessary resources. There is an ambiguity here: Member States spend for their own foreign policy but then they ask the substance to the Service” (Ibid.). Arguably, the underlying question regarding the role of the EEAS itself emerges again, and is now projected into the future: is the EEAS ‘just’ a diplomatic service? It is ‘just’ supposed to serve Member States and institutions, or is the Service a ‘policy entrepreneur in the making’? As emerges from this research is it too early to say, 10 years are an extremely short period for evaluating an evolving institution, even more in the

complex and *sui generis* EU foreign policy apparatus. Certainly, as the research pointed out, there are top-down pushes for reform as well as bottom-up innovations emerging from the practice, that will shape the Service for the next 10 years and beyond.

Conclusion

The research analysed the role of EUDs in the EU foreign policy cycle, to see where things stand at the moment, filling a gap in the literature, while also trying to trace the big picture of the evolution of the EEAS on its 10th anniversary. Practice theory was essential in investigating bottom-up informal practices in the Headquarter-Delegations Nexus and their impact on policy-making. Theoretically these approaches should be put in conversation with other frameworks of IR and EU studies, within an holistic approach capable of making the best of their empirically rich analysis of actors' agency.

From the analysis, emerges an increasing trend regarding the expectations and requests of services from EUDs, still not matched by increased resources and staffing. EUDs' role in the policy cycle underwent an evolution too, they are now capable – given the right balance of political salience and personal-individual factors- of impacting on policy-making in its early stages. This emerging and more proactive role for Delegations might be crucial in the evolution of the EEAS: by enhancing coherence in EU's external action and granting the EEAS the necessary leadership.

Within the context of an evolving EEAS, that might be transforming into a fully-fledged policy entrepreneur, “EUDs have a significant role to play by providing input” (CEPS, 2021:23); if – as suggested by the ‘EEAS 2.0 Task Force’- Delegations will be “allowed to play a more prominent role in policymaking at HQ level” (Ibid., 29), and with the simultaneous presence of a proactive HR/VP, this transition might succeed. The EEAS has certainly experienced a significant evolution over the last decade, but when it will be able to “provide policy proposals and policy initiatives (...) we'll be able to say that we've reached the objective of giving the EEAS its role of ‘engine’ of EU foreign policy” (Interview n.4). It is clear that attempts of reform are being made, if they will succeed it is too early to say. Moreover, being the EEAS ‘chronically underfinanced’ (CEPS, 2021), a substantial increase of resources will be required. If all the stakeholders involved –

notably the Member States and the Commission- will show political willingness (Interview n.3), “the Borrell-Sannino team probably has a better prospect than anybody in the past” (Interview n.8) to successfully reform the Service.

Avenues for future research comprise – other than further inquiries into EUDs practices- a more holistic approach to the Service’s evolution, that follows EUDs’ role and impact on the bigger picture of EU foreign policy. From the still troubling issues regarding internal staffing – i.e. ‘silos’ between EEAS and Commission personnel and lack of technical staff- to more ‘ideational’ ones like the emergence of a European diplomatic culture and the possible establishment of a European diplomatic academy, and their implications for the Service and EU external action coherence.

List of Interviews

Interview 1. Head of Delegation, phone, 11 July 2021.

Interview 2. Head of Delegation, phone, 9 July 2021.

Interview 3. Head of Delegation, online, 12 July 2021.

Interview 4. Head of Delegation, online, 13 July 2021.

Interview 5. Head of Delegation, phone, 12 July 2021.

Interview 6. Political Officer in EU Delegation, online, 12 July 2021.

Interview 7. Head of the Political, Press and Information Section in EU Delegation, phone, 13 July 2021.

Interview 8. Former Head of Delegation, online, 13 July 2021.

Interview 9. Political Officer in EU Delegation, online, 19 July 2021.

Interview 10. Former EEAS Official and Seconded National Expert, online, 21 July 2021.

Interview 11. Political Officer in EU Delegation, online, 21 July 2021.

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