

# The EU as a Structured Power: Organizing EU Foreign Affairs within the Institutional Environment of World Politics

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*The aim of the article is to show how the study of EU foreign politics can profit, both on a theoretical and an empirical level, from linking it more closely with sociologically inspired theories on (international) organizations in world society. Empirically, the article focuses on this question by addressing the actorhood of the EU in foreign politics. The article initially shortly outlines key parameters of recent developments in EU foreign politics, in particular the incremental centralization of foreign policy capacities at the EU level, fostering EU actorhood in global politics. The article then argues that traditional theories of EU integration cannot sufficiently explain this process since they fail to fully address the organizational dynamics underpinning the autonomization of the EU as a distinct foreign policy actor. The article proposes a different direction by integrating the study of EU foreign policy making more closely with sociological theories of world politics, in particular theories of organizational autonomization as they have been developed in sociological neo-institutionalism and modern systems theory. Based on these theories, the article shows how key concept from organizational theory such as an open system perspective, operational closure, and “othering” can be made fruitful for explaining the incremental yet steady autonomization of the EU as a foreign policy actor in a changing world political system.*

## **Introduction**

In this article, I argue that the study of EU foreign politics stands to profit, both on a theoretical and an empirical level, from linking it more closely with sociologically inspired theories of organizations in world society.<sup>1</sup> More precisely, the key argument presented here is that an open-systems perspective, as developed in sociological organizational theory, can in a more nuanced manner than liberal-institutionalist or social constructivist approaches account for the emergent actorhood of the EU as a foreign policy actor. Moreover, this also holds the promise of linking the study of EU foreign politics, on a theoretical level, more closely with theories of global political order in International Relations (IR). The key substantive argument of this article is that

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actorhood in the world political system depends first and foremost not on an organization's own will, its institutional capacities, or its normative (self) image. Actorhood results from structural stimuli emanating from an organizations' environment, including practices of recognition prevalent in that environment. In that sense, the EU—as with other actors in the world political system, such as states (see Aalberts 2010)—can be described as a structured power.

In the following section (section 2) and with a view to offering a thematic introduction into the topic, I will shortly outline key parameters of recent developments in EU foreign politics, focusing in particular on provisions of the Lisbon Treaty as far as they are related to foreign politics, on the council decision to set up the European External Action Service (EEAS) and on some other key cornerstones of EU foreign politics. Taken together these dynamics attest to a considerable centralization of organizational foreign policy capacities at the EU level. The conceptual point of departure then is the observation that the study of EU foreign politics (and probably of integration studies in general) suffers from the legacy of inward-looking theorizing on EU politics, which often stops with such accounts of institutional features and/or normative self-image. Thus, as insightful as such approaches are to a better understanding of the material and normative fundamentals of EU foreign politics, they tend to give too much preference to (undecidable) debates on whether member states or EU institutions are at the driver's seat of European integration (i.e., the legacy of intergovernmentalist vs. supranational theories) or whether the EU is a force for good or not (Pace 2008)—including the related debate of whether EU foreign policies are “effective” and “legitimate” or not (see Stetter, Karbowski, and Masala 2011). In the study of EU foreign policy making, there is a long legacy of making either the institutional set-up of the fragmented EU foreign policy machinery and the gaps between rhetorical ambition and actual impact vis-à-vis third parties the key parameters of analysis—or rendering the analysis of the normative underpinnings of EU foreign politics central (see Hill 1993; Manners 2002; Thomas 2009). As will be shown below, research on EU foreign politics thereby often fails to fully address the degree of autonomization of the EU as a distinct foreign policy actor in the global political system *independent* of such internal dynamics. This legacy has, moreover, led to an unsatisfactory disconnection between the mainstream of studies on EU foreign policy making, on the one hand, and central theoretical debates in IR, on the other. Integration studies have by and large become too strongly separated from IR theory (but see Diez and Wiener 2009; Rynning 2011 for exceptions), which is unfortunate insofar as the EU as a foreign policy actor is structurally embedded into the very global political order IR theorizes about. This article proposes a different direction by integrating the study of EU foreign policy making more closely with a specific trend in contemporary IR theory, namely sociologically inspired theories of world politics. As will be argued further below, such theories are well suited to explain both the (organizational) autonomization of the EU as a distinct foreign policy actor and the way this process—and the power of the EU—relates to the constant making and unmaking of order in the global political system. As a word of caution, it should be emphasized that in this article I will not in detail focus on any specific (set of) case study. The purpose of the subsequent analysis is not to apply a distinct sociological theory empirically but rather to sketch out—underpinned by some empirical illustrations—what such a theory contributes from a conceptual and theoretical angle.

Notwithstanding their obvious merits, liberal institutionalist and social constructivist approaches in integration studies encounter two major problems when discussing EU foreign politics (section 3). First, liberal institutionalist approaches tend to overemphasize the internal institutional dynamics in EU foreign politics at the expense of a greater consideration of how the EU as a foreign policy actor is embedded into—and constituted by—the environment of the world political system, in general, and specific institutional fields on the other (on the field of security policies see Hofmann 2011). Second, social constructivist approaches often measure what the EU does or does not in relation to specific norms “valued” by the EU either in practice or in rhetoric, thereby downplaying the relevance of the EU’s environment (e.g., world polity; other actors) in determining the rather complex processes through which such norms emerge and diffuse in practice. By building on these observations, which also point to the already mentioned rift between key theoretical developments in IR and integration studies, I will further propose to enrich the analysis of EU foreign politics by adding an open systems perspective on organizations, which draws in particular from sociological neo-institutionalism and modern systems theory (section 4).

The key argument that will be advanced is that “actors and events” (Koch 2009:445) in the EU’s (globalized) environment rather than internal institutional and/or normative dynamics shape the key organizational features of EU foreign politics. In other words, the EU constitutes itself as a foreign policy actor within the world political system through operational closure, i.e., the EU observes irritations from its environment (e.g., what other actors say or do; or what kind of events are unfolding) and subsequently translates these irritations into decisions with which it reinforces its organizational boundaries and simultaneously reconstructs this environment by making it “comprehensible” to itself (see Larik 2011). Related to approaches that propagate a “practice turn” or a “social theory” (Bickerton 2011) of EU foreign politics, the open systems perspective central to this article attributes structural relevance to the embedding of the EU into the social context of a dynamic world order (section 5). That is why broader social dynamics of power and in particular “structural power” and the practice of legitimization by “others” (the notion of “othering” in the tradition of sociological neo-institutionalism)—rather than its own material and/or normative capabilities—ultimately shape the position and habitus of the EU as an actor in world politics.

### **Contemporary Foreign Politics of the EU**

EU foreign politics are subject to a considerable degree of path dependency (see theoretically Pierson 1996, 2011). Since the formal inception of the European integration project in the 1950s, foreign politics have left their imprint on the European Community and, since the Maastricht Treaty of 1993, the EU (for a historical overview see Giegerich and Wallace 2010). While as a general rule of thumb an increasing deepening of integration in foreign and security policies, including defense, can be observed, this integration process hardly corresponds with a linear functionalist logic. Traditionally, the degree of integration in non-security-related foreign policy areas, such as the Common Commercial Policy (CCP) or developmental assistance, has been much higher, both in terms of substantive policies and regarding the supranationalization of decision-making procedures, when compared with “hard security” policy areas, such as diplomatic relations or policies with defense and military implications (Stetter 2007). However,

notwithstanding the ongoing institutional complexities and fragmentations, at least since the Maastricht Treaty the EU formally aspires to be a distinct foreign policy actor on the international scene and is also addressed by others as such, e.g., in the context of the Middle East Quartet where the EU is one of the four main parties (Stetter 2012). The attempt to limit the EU's actor capacities in foreign affairs by separating supranational (non-security) policies and security-related foreign policies, enshrined in the famous three-pillar structure of the Maastricht Treaty, soon proved futile. Thus, already the period until the entry into force of the Amsterdam Treaty in 1997 revealed strong dynamics of cross-pillarization (Stetter 2004), which undermined the pillar structure leading to its eventual abolition with the Lisbon Treaty.

Seen from that perspective and notwithstanding the significance of the constitutional changes it brought, the Lisbon Treaty cannot be regarded as a sea change in relation to EU foreign politics. It is yet another step pointing to broader dynamics of an increasing autonomization of the EU as a supranational organization (see Sijursen, 2011a and 2011b) in general, and EU foreign politics as a suborganizational field within the EU specifically, often referred to as a process of Brusselization (Dijkstra and Vanhoonacker 2011).<sup>2</sup> It is not the purpose of this article to account for the numerous provisions of the Lisbon Treaty on foreign politics in a systematic manner. Such an approach would also contradict the conceptual objectives pursued here since it would risk falling back to the classical orthodoxy of dealing with EU politics mainly through an inward-looking perspective that focuses either on institutional provisions or on guiding norms. Yet, three short comments should be made at this stage in order to briefly highlight some key dynamics shaping the current institutional and normative credentials of EU foreign politics and EU actorhood.

First, the Lisbon Treaty has consolidated and codified central institutional parameters already introduced in previous treaty reforms. The Amsterdam Treaty originally set up the office of a High Representative (HR) for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a post held from 1999 until 2009 by Javier Solana and since then by Catherine Ashton. The HR was prior to the Lisbon Treaty at the same time the Secretary General of the Council Secretariat, which underlines the intention of some member states to turn the HR into a counterweight against too much commission influence on diplomacy and defense issues. Under the Lisbon Treaty, the mandate of the HR has been strengthened. The most significant organizational innovation brought about by the Lisbon Treaty is that the HR is now responsible for "all areas of foreign policy" (article 24.1) and, from an institutional perspective, is based simultaneously within the commission and the council. The HR is presiding over the deliberations in the Foreign Affairs Council but at the same time is a vice-president of the European Commission (article 18).

Moreover, the Lisbon Treaty follows the pattern of previous treaty reforms by facilitating the possibility to make decisions in the council on the basis of the revised qualified-majority procedure (QMV). While decision making in EU foreign politics continues to be dominated by unanimity, pointing to the strong intergovernmental dynamics in this policy area, the Treaty of Lisbon defines and widens the range of scenarios under which the council can decide by QMV, e.g., if there has been a previous general decision by the European Council, if it is an

2. It should be noted that Brusselization does not necessarily mean that supranational actors run the show. There is also an indication that Brusselization serves the power of specific national actors, i.e., Brussels-based ambassadors (Mérand, Hofmann, and Irontelle 2011).

implementation decision, or if new Special Representatives are to be appointed. Stricter rules apply to military and defense issues; however, there is no longer a requirement for a treaty change to bring military and defense issues under a more supranational regime, since the European Council can unanimously decide to introduce a Common Defense Policy that leads to a “common defense” (article 24). Moreover, and in line with the general provision of the Lisbon Treaty to equip the EU with legal personality, the general propositions of the union as an actor with its own foreign policy identity have been strengthened. This not only relates to the union’s position in international law, e.g., through the newly established union Delegations (article 32), but also in relation to EU member states.

Although foreign policy mainly is a shared competence of the union and member states—with the CCP being an exclusive union competence—a sense of hierarchy in favor of the union is ingrained in the treaty insofar as member states should refrain from “any action which is contrary to the interests [*sic*] of the Union” (article 24.3). Even more than that, member states should “ensure that their national policies conform to the Union positions” (article 21). While this certainly cannot be read as an abrogation by member states to their share of sovereignty in foreign affairs, it does highlight the restriction traditional national sovereignty encounters within the EU today even in the field of foreign affairs. This also relates to the two EU member states, France and the UK, which hold a permanent (veto) position in the UN Security Council. Not only has the HR the right to represent the EU’s position in the Security Council (article 38.2), but France and the UK are called to “defend the positions and the interests of the Union” when acting in the Security Council (see also Pirozzi 2011).

Second, the Lisbon Treaty also approaches the organizational underpinnings of the union’s foreign policy apparatus—an apparatus which used to consist of various directorates-general of the European Commission, the council secretariat, and various subunits therein (e.g., Political and Security Committee), special representatives, etc. Although not detailed in the Lisbon Treaty, article 27.3 calls upon the HR to present a proposal to the council with a view to establishing a European External Action Service (EEAS). This is the first time at the union level a single organizational unit is foreseen that, comparable to national foreign ministries, combines (almost) all commission and council departments dealing with foreign politics. A Council Decision (2010/427/EU) of 26 July 2010 has then set up the EEAS as “a functionally autonomous body of the European Union” working under the authority of the High Representative (article 1.2). This is not the place to describe the inter-institutional battles that occurred behind and sometimes on stage prior to the adoption of this council decision (see Mauri 2009), and neither can the goal be to make a comprehensive assessment of the rather mixed balance sheet of how the EEAS has operated since its inception (see Emerson et al. 2011; Lieb 2011; Lieb and Kremer 2010; Batora 2010). What matters here is the observation that the incremental process of change and centralization in EU foreign politics has also on the level of organizational dynamics left its mark on the EU, thereby overcoming traditional dichotomies of supranational vs. intergovernmental (see for a related argument on evolution Cutler in this special issue).

The EEAS comprises staff from the commission and the council and also comprises seconded diplomats from member states, which will have to work “solely with the interest of

the Union in mind” (point 9 of the Decision). Early figures circulating indicated that out of a staff of 1,643 diplomats, 585 (36%) come from the (now dissolved) DG External Relations, 93 from DG Development (6%), with the remaining parts of DG Development being merged with personnel from DG External Cooperation Program within the newly created DG Development Cooperation. Another 436 posts will come from staff of the Commission Delegations (27%), with 411 positions to be filled with staff previously being employed in the Council Secretariat (25%). Although remaining positions will be filled with newly appointed personnel (118 posts; 6%) and an unspecified number with personnel seconded from national foreign ministries, this distribution highlights the strong position of Brussels-based diplomats, and in particular those coming from the commission, within the EEAS.<sup>3</sup>

Third, apart from these constitutional and organizational changes, the EU has since the Maastricht Treaty become more assertive in developing its profile as a foreign policy actor by defining its interests and identity on the global scale. As Rogers (2009) notes, the EU has developed under the leadership of Javier Solana, and supported by a diffuse “discourse coalition” of academics, think tanks, journalists, NGOs, and others, its grand strategy from being a “civilian power” (see also the concept of normative power by Manners 2002) and now can be understood as a “global power” that articulates and projects its strategic interests, in particular in relation to what is perceived as “global threats” (e.g., terrorism, climate change, poverty), defines its strategic relations to other parts of the world (in particular its neighborhood, e.g., the European Neighborhood Policy or the Union for the Mediterranean), and that also tries to project its norms and identity in global affairs, based in particular on the norms of “effective multilateralism” and “regional integration.” While these substantive cornerstones form the implicit basis of many EU foreign policy initiatives, they have been spelled out explicitly in the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003 and the report on the implementation of the ESS of 2008.

Effective multilateralism thus comprises both a commitment to the type of foreign policy pursued by the EU—reflecting the union’s own multilateral identity, and an expectation voiced toward other states and regional/international organizations to increase multilateral cooperation on regional and global scales, both dimensions being well summarized in Thomas Diez’s understanding of the EU as “constructing the Self, changing Others” (2005). However, in contrast to the “civilian power” period, the recourse to “effectiveness” in how the EU defines multilateralism also includes the ambition of the EU, which “carries greater responsibilities than at any time in its history,”<sup>4</sup> to take recourse to all instruments of foreign politics, including the use of military force if need be and a more explicit reference to geopolitical interests and security-related concerns rather than “liberal” norms only. This is not to argue that the EU necessarily is a *powerful* global power—there are contesting arguments about the EU being a small, normal, or emerging power in the literature (Toje 2011; Pardo 2011). However, notwithstanding how this debate is settled, all these approaches attribute some power to the EU—in other words some status of meaningful actorhood within the world political system. As the following sections will show this actorhood of the EU can be approached from diverse

3. See <http://www.europeandvoice.com/article/2010/12/ashton-publishes-names-of-eeasmanagers/69812.aspx>.

4. See [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/reports/104630.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/reports/104630.pdf).

theoretical angles. “Classical” theories in integration studies have in that context their merits but also their limitations (see the following section) that can be overcome when studying EU actorhood from sociologically inspired perspectives (see the subsequent sections).

### **Theorizing EU Foreign Politics and EU Actorhood**

Although the field of EU foreign policy analysis, with its distinct research community, can claim some autonomy from other areas of integration studies, the preoccupation with general theoretical and conceptual trends in the wider study of the evolution of the political system of the EU/EC remain prominent therein too. This has not only fostered a tradition of separating the study of EU foreign politics from theoretical debates in IR, with the exception of mainly postmodern and poststructuralist approaches (e.g., Othering, governmentality) and (global) governance approaches (see for an overview Diez and Wiener 2009) but also underpins some more general trends in research on EU foreign affairs. I consider three dominant trends of particular relevance for understanding how the increasing integration of EU foreign politics and EU actorhood are usually conceptualized.

First and most importantly, the process of integration in foreign politics is often understood as the outcome of the opposing dynamics of (functional/normative) supranationalism on the one hand and (interest-oriented) intergovernmentalism on the other. These dominant theoretical paradigms of integration studies render much of the analysis of EU foreign politics heavily inward looking. Thus, integration—or the lack thereof—is considered the outcome of competing intentions and actions of specific units within the EU (see as a classic Moravcsik 1998). This then also shifts analyses to the study of the preferences of supranational actors such as the commission or the HR, both attempting to concentrate more foreign policy capacities in Brussels or by viewing member states as the dominant actors in the European policy architecture and assessing their interest in “delegating” powers to agents at the EU level. The need of reconciling the logic of both approaches—with European history providing plenty of examples for both rationales—actually explains the popularity of principal-agent theories as an explanatory concept for understanding European integration at large (Pollack 2003; Niemann and Huigens 2011). Thus, compared to traditional integration theories, principal-agent approaches have the advantage that they allow to simultaneously attribute considerable powers to both supranational actors (e.g., agents such as the Court of Justice, the commission, EU agencies) and member states (i.e., principals). This advantage renders principal-agent approaches at the same time theoretically rather vague. And being particularly problematic for a theory based on a positivist epistemology, both integration and non-integration can be explained by principal-agent approaches depending on whether agency-drift or principal-interests are studied. Moreover, as will be argued below, such an inward-looking focus, as useful as it has been in bridging the gap between the entrenched camps of supranationalist vs. intergovernmentalist approaches, has come at the price of detaching the analysis of EU foreign policies and EU actorhood from comprehensive theories of (world) politics.

Second, this general observation goes hand in hand with two related trends in the study of EU foreign politics. On the one hand, with research on the European Neighborhood Policy and the often hegemonic relations of the EU with its immediate abroad being a particularly

prominent exception (Christiansen 2000; Pace 2006; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2010), the study of EU foreign politics is characterized by a second inward-looking legacy, namely its concern with either battles between different foreign policy actors within the EU or with the exegesis of Treaty provisions and other institutional regulations. While such an institutional perspective certainly is important for a proper understanding of EU foreign affairs, it nevertheless is problematic from several points of view. Hence, the strong focus on the often diverging interests, identities, and conflictive relations between actors in the EU foreign policy arena, such as the commission, individual member states, the council, and others, has often resulted in claims that the EU is a *sui generis* foreign policy actor lacking the often-quoted single telephone number Henry Kissinger missed in the early 1970s when he apparently was desperate to dial across the Atlantic.

However, the popularity this quotation still has in debates until today (including, *ex negativo*, this article) does not necessarily render it plausible. Its constant repetition does not only ignore the substantive changes to which EU foreign politics were subject during the last forty years. More importantly, it also risks preventing researchers from undertaking a proper comparative perspective on EU actorhood, comparing EU foreign politics with the foreign politics of other actors, in particular (liberal-democratic) nation states. Such a comparative foreign policy analysis would quickly reveal isomorphic dynamics in the organizational design of seemingly unitary foreign policy actors in other political systems, including byzantine distributions of formal responsibilities amongst actors such as prime ministers, presidents, foreign ministries, development ministries, party groups, courts, and others.

On the other hand, such inward-looking perspectives are a hindrance for a greater dialogue between EU foreign politics studies and IR. The problems on that level can well be studied when looking at the popularity of another important concept for the study of EU foreign politics, namely the strong focus on an alleged lack of efficiency and power of EU foreign politics, epitomized by the famous, but theoretically rather simplistic notion of an alleged “capability-expectation gap” (Hill 1993). A key problem with such approaches is, somewhat related to what has been argued above, that the assumption that the EU lacks efficiency and/or power is based on absolute rather than relational notions of efficiency and power.<sup>5</sup> From a theoretical perspective this already is problematic insofar as key theories of power in the social sciences, e.g., in Lukes, Luhmann, Foucault, or Bourdieu (see Borch 2005), have shown that power cannot be measured merely in relation to capabilities or internal/external expectations but requires a proper understanding of the position of an actor within a specific social field. In the case of the efficiency, power, and actorhood of the EU, this would require focusing on the relative position of the EU in relation to other actors operating in the same social arena, e.g., the arena of world politics. Moreover, analyses that base their assessment of the efficiency/power/actorhood of the EU on allegedly objective criteria, such as a divergence between (institutional) capabilities and expectations by the “self” or by “others,” risk reifying the political discourses with which these attributions are entangled and, therefore, often fail to observe non-actor related dimensions of power, such as structural or indirect forms of power (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Diez, Stetter, and Albert 2006).

5. The strong focus on efficiency also risks disregarding the question of legitimacy and democracy in EU foreign politics (see Sjørusen 2011a).



This relative neglect of structural forms of power in much research on EU foreign politics—again poststructuralist and postmodern approaches being the exception—is, finally, problematic insofar as it prevents EU studies asking questions about the relation between actor properties on the one hand and structural features of the world political system on the other—in particular those that transcend traditional Westphalian structures. A case in point is the relative neglect integration studies has shown vis-à-vis key debates on global political order in IR, e.g., the debate on primary institutions of international society (Buzan 2004) or the broader literature on the power of norms and logics of appropriateness in global politics. A key insight stemming from these research streams is that actors with little formal power-capacities often have a considerably greater role to play in international relations due to their “normative fit” with broader world cultural or world political norms than would have been expected when only addressing the absolute power resources available to them. Consider only the IR literature that addresses the role of NGOs in fostering the status of human rights in international politics (Risse et al. 1999) or the literature on the role of coalitions of small states and NGOs in the emergence of the International Criminal Court and the Human Security paradigm (Deitelhoff 2009; Glasius 2008), or, finally, the literature discussing how the primary institution of sovereignty bestows both small and big states with considerable power resources in international society. If now the diagnosis in much IR theory is right that world politics has moved toward a post-Westphalian stage, then there is indeed reason to assume—and this has already since the 1970s nurtured research agendas that focus on the EU as a civilian/normative power—that the EU as a regional organization has a strong affinity to some post-Westphalian structural features of the world political system, such as the increasingly relevant primary institutions of multilateralism and regional integration (see Albert and Stetter forthcoming). Arguably, EU actorhood is affected more by the EU’s ability to legitimize itself in relation to such broader global norms, rather than by its internal organizational coherence or normative self-image.

### **The EU, its Environment, and World Cultural Norms**

In this and the following section, I shall now address, from a theoretical angle, the question how a sociologically inspired perspective on the EU as an “open system” is helpful in avoiding the aforementioned problems of inward-looking perspectives on the EU’s foreign policy actorhood. In this section, I propose an open systems perspective as an alternative to the traditional inward-looking foci on institutional complexities and fragmentation as well as self-held norms. Building on such open systems perspectives, as they are discussed in particular in sociological neo-institutionalism and modern systems theory (see Koch 2009), provides insights into how the EU as a foreign policy actor is embedded into and constituted by the way it relates to its environment in the world political system, e.g., actors, events, and world cultural norms/structures prevalent therein. This understanding also allows linking debates on the organizational evolution of the EU with postmodern/poststructuralist debates on the identity of the union. Also in that research tradition (see Diez 2005; Cambell 1998), which itself builds on the observation that society is constituted through discourse and communication (for an IR perspective on that matter see Albert, Kessler, and Stetter 2008), identity is not considered as a given property of the EU or other

actors but is rather the result of relational differences and opposition to (antagonistic) “others.” The open system perspective developed here shares basic epistemological premises with post-structuralism as well as with other sociologically inspired theories in IR and integration studies not discussed here in greater detail.

In other words, a sociologically inspired approach toward the institutional evolution of the EU as a foreign policy actor shifts the analytical focus, as already alluded to, to “actors and events” (Koch 2009:445) in the EU’s (globalized) environment. This does, of course, not mean the EU as an organization would in any way be causally dependent on its environment. Notwithstanding the “fuzzy borders” (Christiansen 2000) of the EU due to variable geometries within the union (e.g., Euro-Zone Schengen) and the extension of functional policy spaces to parts of its neighborhood (e.g. European Neighbourhood Policy), the EU as an organization reproduces itself on the basis of its own decisions only (for a comparable perspective focusing on communications rather than decisions, Bicchi 2011 or Dijkstra and Vanhoonacker 2011). To draw from modern system theory, the EU as an organization is necessarily operatively closed, as long as it continues to make decisions. However, in order to process decisions, the EU requires information and irritations from its environment. In other words, the EU as with any organization, including states, needs to be cognitively open toward information from the outside and can only exist as an organization-within-an-environment, which translates environmental irritations—e.g., the Arab uprisings, a change of leadership in China, an earthquake in Turkey—into organizational decisions, thereby reinforcing its own organizational boundaries and constructing specific images (i.e., observations) of the social reality it confronts.

There are three main levels on which such an open systems perspective on EU foreign politics offers new insights into the dynamics shaping the evolution of the EU, in general, and the incremental yet steady centralization and autonomization of the EU as a distinct foreign policy actor in world politics, more specifically. First, being an organization within an environment, which contains and signals all the information irritating an organization, the ultimate goal of an organization always is, with a view of ensuring organizational adaptation and survival, to make the environment more predictable (Koch 2009:438). And the response modern organizations have found for this challenge is—as sociological neo-institutionalism has shown—to imagine themselves and other organizations as rational actors driven by specific means-end calculations and objectives, e.g., by responding to the aforementioned examples with decisions of the commission or the council on starting a new funding line for civil society organizations in Arab countries, announcing a visit of the commission president to Beijing or setting up a humanitarian assistance mission in support of Turkey.

This argument highlights why an open systems perspective can theoretically be well combined with systems theoretical notions of organizations understood as social systems which reproduce themselves on the basis of decisions only. Thus, decisions are the specific mode of operation with which organizations try to render their continued existence likely by adapting to their environment based on “continuing efforts to systematize social life around standardized rules and schemes that explicitly differentiate and then seek to link means and

ends” of how to respond to environmental irritations (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2006:13, here quoting Jepperson). Being characterized by continuous feedbacks between environmental irritations and systemic decisions, organizations are dynamic actors, which in their evolution continuously engage in reconstructing themselves, and the environment they observe. It is from that perspective that it can be argued that the autonomization of organizations constantly “opens up new social frontiers to be organized” (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2006:14).

Second, organizations do not depend on clear-cut “material” borders toward other organizations in order to be autonomous (see for a related argument, focusing on the embedding of organizations in settings of assemblage Srivastava in this special issue). That is why the extension of the EU’s governance space toward third countries, referred to as external governance (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2010) does not undermine the organizational autonomy of the EU and neither does the multilayered features of governance within the European space, in which governance functions are shared and often overlap between EU, national, regional, and local administrations. In other words, for an organization to be autonomous, it is not necessary—and even not possible—that its borders to other organizations are clearly and neatly demarcated. That is why it has become a standard pattern that “modern organizations are so enmeshed with external organizations.” Organizational overlaps cannot be regarded as an obstacle to organizational autonomy (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2006:270).

As Martin Koch has argued on that basis, states are by definition members of international organizations, the EU being no exception, but that they are at the same time “part of its environment” (2009:438). These arguments are a powerful reminder that the status of organizations as systems-in-an-environment ensures their autonomy—and that autonomy is not depending on a specific type of relation between principals and agents. By seeing institutions merely as wholes consisting of specific parts (e.g., member states), these latter approaches cannot adequately theorize on the emergent dynamics of international organizations, including the autonomy of the EU as a foreign policy actor. In contrast, sociological approaches show the evolution of new organizations cannot be controlled by “principals”—actorhood emerges once key organizational practices have become standardized through operational closure and the internal processing of decisions/communications, independently of whether actorhood is recognized legally or politically (Bicchi 2011; Cutler in this special issue).

Third, and from an IR perspective probably the most important insight, an open systems perspective ultimately invites to reframe principal-agent theories on a second level too, namely regarding the issue of organizational autonomy. As far as the notion of “principals” is concerned, a key insight from an open systems perspective in organizational research is that not the actors in the environment of an organization, such as for example states, but rather the structural features of the world polity constitute the main environmental factor shaping the emergence and evolution of organizational status. In other words, organizations are “under a great deal of social and cultural control” (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2006:46), but not from units within but rather from a broader world culture they relate to. The most important of these structural features in the environment of any organization are today key world cultural principles such as rationalization, scientification, and universalization (see Meyer 2000) on the one hand and functional differentiation as a central form of differentiation of modern world

society on the other (Albert and Buzan 2010).<sup>6</sup> That is why “concepts of world society and world culture, much like global trade and diplomacy before them, have come to describe the current scope of social affairs” (Drori, Meyer, and Hwang 2006: 13), including the dynamics that shape, facilitate, and constrain the emergence and autonomization of regional organizations. When studying organizations within the world political system, it is helpful to not only address these encompassing cultural standards in world society but to focus, much in line with what modern systems theory argues, on the cultural practices shaping distinct functional systems, such as *inter alia* politics. The reference to diplomacy in the aforementioned quote is then quite instructive from an IR perspective. In IR it has in particular been the English School, which has systematically focused on such cultural “meta-norms” of international/world society, referred to as “primary institutions” (Buzan 2004). Diplomacy—alongside sovereignty, trade, and territoriality, one of the earliest primary institutions within the global political system—is, seen from that perspective, an important element of this cultural underpinning of international society. It is immediately evident that these very norms have enabled and greatly facilitated the emergence and isomorphic global spread of the organizational model of the nation-state.

In that sense, it is not concrete actors, as principal-agent theories hold, but rather cultural meta-norms that are the main “principal” of organizational emergence and change. This argument can now be extended to the autonomization of other important types of organizations in the modern world political system, e.g., international organizations. There is reason to assume that the gradual emergence, the increasing number and the growing capacities of international organizations (see Abbott and Snidal 2000), including the EU, is not a process designed and controlled by other organizations such as states but rather the result of structural changes in the environment of such organizations—e.g., the gradually increasing relevance of multilateralism and regionalism as primary institutions of the contemporary world political system. These are norms that render the “actorhood” of international/supranational organizations plausible. This does of course not mean that “old” primary institutions/world cultural norms such as sovereignty or the organizational model of the nation-state would necessarily lose importance. The growing autonomization of the EU as a distinct foreign policy actor is a case in point. This process undoubtedly depends on the emergence of the aforementioned “new” norms, which facilitate the consolidation of IOs such as the EU as autonomous actors. At the same time, however, the EU draws from and contributes to the evolution of “old” norms, such as diplomacy and sovereignty, e.g., when striving for legal personality, when consolidating its own internal and external sovereignty (Stetter 2007), and when fostering its diplomatic status within international society through the establishment of the External Action Service and Union Delegations. In many ways, the EU wants to appear as a nation-state and the symbols it cherishes (anthem, flag, Security Strategies, etc.) imitate that model. And this makes sense insofar as undoubtedly diplomacy, sovereignty, and territoriality continue to be key prerequisites, both legally and politically, for being recognized as a key actor in world politics.

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6. One could refer to the way organizational developments in the world political system respond to functional differentiation, e.g., in relation to the high degree of issue-specific organizational fields in the context of global governance regimes.

### **The Power of the EU In World Politics**

By focusing on the impact of member states and of the byzantine institutional fragmentation on the foreign policy actorhood of the EU, or by studying the alleged normative power of the EU in global politics, inward-looking perspectives are also tempted to adopt somewhat under-theorized notions of power and efficiency. By doing so, they tend to ignore a second major insight generated by organizational research in sociology, namely that broader social dynamics of power and in particular structure-related indirect power and legitimization by “others” matter. These dynamics and not so much allegedly “objective” or “norm-related” criteria of power shape the position and habitus of actors within specific social fields. A crucial insight offered by both sociological neo-institutionalism and modern systems theory—shared by other sociologically inspired studies on the EU—is thus that the status of being an actor as well as an actors’ power are not intrinsic capacities. It is “enactments more than action” (Meyer, Drori, and Hwang 2006:47), actors play scripts which they do not author themselves. Moreover, sustaining a viable actorhood status, e.g., as a foreign policy actor, crucially depends on the legitimacy of one’s actorhood within the wider social field an actor is embedded in. In that sense, “the modern organization as actor is in no real sense an autonomous, rational, or purposive actor. Actorhood is itself a standardized script, which expands and diffuses” (Meyer, Drori, and Hwang 2006:270). Yet, it needs to be added here that in sociological neo-institutionalism legitimacy is not a normative category, as social constructivist approaches to the EU’s alleged normative power would hold. Legitimacy refers here to the practical “fit” between organizational properties on the one hand and world polity norms on the other. Such dominant norms in the world polity are in particular, as has been outlined in different sociological theories (see Meyer 2000; Luhmann 1998), the key myths of modernity such as rationalization, universality, scientization, or functional differentiation. These myths must therefore not be conflated with a modernist or teleological understanding of norms. More precisely: rationalization is not to be equated with being rational, universalization does not mean that a norm is uncritically shared by all, scientization does not lead to undisputable knowledge, and functional differentiation does not mean that world society is functional in the sense of being efficient (see in detail Stetter 2012b). That is why Meyer, Drori, and Hwang maintain that “seen macroscopically, there is a great deal of irrationality in the rationalization of the modern system” (Meyer, Drori, and Hwang 2010:21).

What it does, however, mean is that actorhood status and, consequently, the power and efficiency attributed to actors, cannot reasonably be separated from an assessment of how an organization aims to conform to meta-norms of international/world society. In other words, structural power lies in particular with those organizations whose actorhood status is seen to correspond (by others) with dominant world societal norms, in general, and field-specific norms specifically. It has, for example, been shown (Diez, Stetter, and Albert 2006) that the EU can in many instances exert quite a significant amount of structural power in relation to border conflicts in Europe and its immediate neighborhood. And in that context it has in particular been the reference to European integration as a peace project, itself a derivative of the norm of regional integration within international society, which structurally strengthens the role of the EU in conflict settings despite the EU’s limitations to exert direct power in many conflict settings. The EU presents regional integration as rational (i.e., regional integration

fosters peace and prosperity), present it as a universal model that can be “exported” to all world regions and views, supported by arguments of many academics, intellectuals, and think tanks, the linkage between regional integration and peace/prosperity as “true” (i.e., the history of Europe after the Second World War confirming the validity of the EU’s model of regional government).

Since the quality of actorhood that an organization has is largely the result of external attributions, the role of “rationalized others” (Meyer 2000) also deserves attention when studying the actorhood of the EU in foreign politics. It needs to be noted that the neo-institutionalist understanding of othering differs from the way this concept usually is applied in IR. Thus, it does not refer to dynamics of defining the own identity through symbolic bordering toward others, although this also needs to be a key component of any analysis of EU foreign politics (Diez 2005). It is based on the observation that in modern world society the status of an actor crucially depends on the ascriptions of actorhood made by allegedly disinterested others, in particular those others that can successfully claim to base their judgments on rationalized, universal, and scientifically based reasoning rather than partial, interest-driven objectives (for how this relates to EU foreign politics and changing world order see Eriksen 2011). These carriers of world cultural norms must not necessarily be academics but primarily comprise those organizations that base their activities on methods and tools of applied rather than theory-based science such as rating organizations, think tanks, and consultants, many NGOs, and others (see from a related theoretical perspective, based on Foucault and Merlingen 2011:154). Thus, in many social fields these knowledge-based actors possess little institutional but considerable structural power, they have a strong role in defining the issues to be addressed (e.g., peace-building; cultural dialogue; neo-liberal economic reforms; lending credibility; transforming the European educational system) and even rank “sovereign” nation-states that subsequently render an improvement of their status in these ranking a goal of national policy making (e.g., the PISA ranking, transformation indices, etc.).

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze this approach in detail. However, it is clear that adopting such an alternative perspective on structural power in world society means the EU’s power as a foreign policy actor cannot be studied following traditional notions of power focused on institutional capabilities alone. Instead, it highlights the study of the EU as a foreign policy actor also requires a consideration of how “others”—in particular allegedly disinterested others such as think tanks, NGOs, or academics—ascibe foreign policy actorhood to the EU and formulate demands on what the EU should do. Seen from that perspective, and notwithstanding the limits of the “infrastructure underpinning EU foreign policy” due to its failure “to engage even the most attentive national publics in a truly ‘European’ debate on foreign, security and defence policy” (Tonra 2011:1199), the construction of EU actorhood by such others merits attention. And this includes the attempt by the EU to actually commission ever new research projects on the role of the EU as a global actor in the framework of its own R&D policy. This type of scientific research on the EU but also the policy papers issued regularly by various European and national foreign policy research institutes and think tanks, are examples of how the EU’s status of legitimate actorhood becomes socially constructed within epistemic communities claiming expertise on “foreign politics.” Ironically, it is then

precisely the recourse to “policy failures” by academics and think tanks that constantly creates new stimuli for centralizing foreign policies at the EU level.

Such attributions of legitimate actorhood status are then underpinned by the practices of governmentality (Merlingen 2011) inherent to EU foreign politics. It directs attention away from the issue of efficiency, which from the perspective adopted in this article first and foremost is the question of how an organization adapts to its environment rather than the fit between capabilities and expectations, and allows to scrutinize how the EU succeeds in defining large-scale policy projects, such as *inter alia* its neighborhood policy or external police missions. Even more importantly, it allows studying how the EU deploys governance techniques through which it shapes the behavior of others, including national administrations such as national foreign ministries in Europe, which reorganize themselves according to EU requirements<sup>7</sup> or administrations in third countries, which engage in dense contractual relations with the union in which they promise to engage in various domestic “reforms.”

Finally, it also relates to the question of how the governmentality of EU foreign politics shapes, enables, and constrains the movement of people within and outside the EU through biopolitical practices. This research focus has primarily been applied to the study of the external dimension of EU justice and home affairs (Balzacq 2009; Bigo 2006), migration policies and antiterrorism policies (Aradau and van Munster 2007). This biopolitical actorhood of the EU can, thus, be studied when looking at the way how key foreign policy institutions, such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, aim to meticulously regulate and control the movement of outsiders into the EU, usually but not always in a restrictive manner. It also relates to how the readmission agreements between the EU and third countries as well as the “militarization” of EU external border control constructs EU actorhood. And within the EU, it relates to EU actorhood that results from the EU’s structural capacity to discipline the scope of ideas and actions with a view to specific policy issues in national prime ministers’ offices, foreign, defense, and development ministries and to trigger movement of national diplomats into the European External Action Service, where they have to serve “solely with the interest of the union in mind.” It also manifests itself whenever “national” soldiers and police officers head for EU missions in third countries where they are following the same logic, ultimately expected to risk their life and the life of non-EU citizens for “the interests of the union,” a union increasingly defining itself and being defined by others as an emerging or “global power” (Rogers 2009).

## Conclusion

This article discussed from a theoretical perspective how insights from the study of world society in sociology, in particular sociological neo-institutionalism and modern systems theory, can contribute to a better conceptual understanding of the increasing autonomization of the EU as a foreign policy actor and the power of the EU within the global political system. This article does not claim that this perspective is the only one that offers a fruitful addition to inward-looking perspectives of either liberal-institutionalist (e.g., principal-agent) or social constructivist (e.g., normative power) outlook. Thus, there are important overlaps between

7. See the argument by Perthes, that Germany—or for that matter Finland or Ireland—became, through EU membership and their involvement in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Mediterranean countries (see the contribution by Volker Perthes on [http://www.euromesco.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=132&Itemid=48&lang=fr](http://www.euromesco.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=132&Itemid=48&lang=fr)).

what has been argued in this article and various other theoretical approaches, mostly radical constructivist and poststructuralist theories, which have in recent years been applied to the study of EU foreign politics too, such as Foucauldian discourse analysis (Merlingen 2011; Bickerton 2011), hegemonic discourse theory (Rogers 2009), postmodern perspectives (Larsen 2009; Diez 2005), or Bourdieuan field research (Mérand 2010).

What most of these approaches and the theories of world society discussed in this article have in common, besides their constructivist credentials, is that they direct attention toward the underlying social and global dynamics on a structural and relational level, which explains the emergence and consolidation of the EU as a powerful foreign policy actor. Seen from that perspective of a “social theory” (Bickerton 2011) of EU foreign affairs, the EU is not a normative power and neither is its role in world politics defined by its own will or its own institutional capacities—or the lack thereof. As this article has claimed the EU rather is a structured and relational power insofar as its status in world politics—as the status of all other organizations, including states—first and foremost depends on its ability to relate and adapt through decisions to the constantly changing cultural and structural context of world/international society on the one hand and on how other actors in that field (de)legitimize its status on the other.

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