

In Lieu of Esprit de Corps? The Centrality of Informality in Everyday Diplomacy in the European External Action Service

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Dear discussant and fellow panelists!

Thank you for reading and commenting on a fairly rough draft of my paper about the centrality of informality in everyday diplomacy in the European External Action Service. Given the draft is at an early stage, my interpretations are still in progress and the conclusion remains tentative.

Because the draft reflects research in progress, I highly appreciate your feedback at this early stage! Besides your constructive input on the paper's framing, contribution, and conceptual part, I would be particularly grateful for comments on how to improve the trustworthiness of the analysis. For instance, where could my descriptions of everyday diplomacy benefit from being more "thick", which interpretations could be further contextualized, and are there elements in the analysis that you find particularly intriguing and would like to be further unpacked? Needless to say, all comments are very welcome and much appreciated.

Once again, thank you for reading and commenting on my draft.

Looking forward to reading your work and meeting you all in Miami!

Kind regards,

Jonas.

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Abstract: The European External Action Service is the European Union's diplomatic service. Recruiting EU staff and seconded officials from all over the 27 EU-member states, the EEAS is a melting pot consisting of officials with different native languages, nationalities, and organizational cultures. Existing studies argue how the lack of esprit de corps—shared beliefs and values within a group desiring to achieve a common goal—makes the EEAS an incomplete diplomatic service. But much is still to be learned about how officials actually experience their own everyday life in the EEAS. Inspired by the officials' own stories about everyday life in the EEAS headquarters and delegations abroad, the article uses Etienne Wenger's concept of Community of Practice as analytical lens to examine how officials conduct diplomacy in practice from the bottom-up. Elucidating the centrality of informality in the process of becoming a EEAS official capable of successfully addressing challenges and opportunities, the analysis challenges top-down interpretations of the EEAS. The adaptability to local conditions learned via informal engagements with local colleagues and use of personal networks may provide the EEAS a key advantage in modern diplomacy characterized by shifting goals and priorities. However, the centrality of informality in everyday diplomacy in the EEAS also highlights potential pitfalls (e.g., lack of democratic control) that are discussed.

Keywords: European External Action Service; community of practice; esprit de corps; diplomacy; informality

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Introduction

Since European External Action Service (EEAS) was established in 2010, scholars have been tracking the emergence of organizational commonalities and difference within the EEAS (Cross, 2011; Spence, 2012; Juncos and Pomorska, 2013, 2014; Bátorá and Spence, 2015; Henökl, 2015). This article engages with existing studies focusing on the emergence of esprit de corps within the EEAS (Cross, 2011; Juncos and Pomorska, 2014; Vimont, 2021). Esprit de corps is defined as “shared beliefs and values among the individuals within a group and a desire among those individuals to achieve a common goal” (Juncos and Pomorska, 2014, p. 305) and has traditionally been understood as a core feature of a successful diplomatic service (Vimont, 2021). Existing research finds that a sense of esprit de corps has not materialized within the EEAS (e.g., Juncos and Pomorska, 2014; Vimont, 2021). From the premise that esprit de corps is key to successful diplomacy, the EEAS is deemed an incomplete diplomatic service. The recommendation is clear: To increase the usefulness of the EEAS to the EU and its member states, a strong sense of esprit de corps must be cultivated (e.g., Juncos and Pomorska, 2014, p. 316).

Deviating from the predominate top-down perspective on the EEAS focusing on if and to what extent esprit de corps has materialized, this article examines how EEAS officials experience everyday diplomacy in the EEAS headquarters and delegations abroad from the bottom-up (see also Lequesne, 2015; Mérand, 2021). In lieu of esprit de corps, the article asks, how do EEAS officials conduct diplomacy in practice? More precisely, how do individuals become EEAS officials and capable of practicing diplomacy. Moreover, what are the challenges and opportunities EEAS officials face in everyday diplomacy.

Drawing inspiration from the 10 in-depth interviews I conducted with former and current EEAS officials from August 2019 to November 2021, the article uses Etienne Wenger’s (1998) concept of Community of Practice (CoP) as an analytical lens to organize and interpret individuals’ stories about how they became EEAS officials and conduct(ed) diplomacy in practice. A CoP denotes a group of individuals who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 4). From a CoP perspective, the analytical focus on practitioners is how individuals in a group of practitioners *mutually engage* in negotiating what *joint enterprise* to pursue and the appropriate means to use from their *shared repertoire* of skills and resources. More abstract features of work life as esprit de corps or organizational culture may influence how practitioners work in practice, but are not a priori assumed to matter. From a CoP perspective, the idea of employees aligning their daily work practices with the stated key goals and shared values of an organization is an ideal that should not be confused with an actual depiction of how practitioners get things done in practice. From a CoP

perspective, if we want to examine how things are actually done *in practice*, we should begin our inquiry with how practitioners interact with each other when they are getting things done.

Using CoP to organize and interpret the interview data, I realized how important informality was for everyday diplomacy in the EEAS. From the individual stories about becoming and being a EEAS official it varied how well these informal ways of mutually engaging functioned and contributed to training newcomers as well as provided valuable input about how to face local challenges and exploit opportunities in everyday diplomacy. But the interviewees highlighted the central role of day-to-day engagements with close colleagues and use personal networks to define what the EU's best interest was in different cases or which position the EU ought to take on specific issues. Moreover, informal practices were key to receiving and sending important information, sharing knowledge, and discuss the most appropriate ways to pursue what was understood to be the EU's interest. Generally, officials opted for informality and informal practices when they needed to get things done was, because the interviewees found the formal EEAS procedures and official lines of communication too inefficient. In other words, informality became the acceptable way to compensate for the lack of an up-to-date formal administrative and communication infrastructure.

The article's overall findings complement the growing number of CoP studies of various EU-institutions (Bicchi, 2011, 2016; Græger, 2016; Bremberg, Sonnsjö and Mobjörk, 2018) that find that informal coordination and knowledge-sharing between practitioners are central to getting things done in practice. In contrast to aforementioned CoP studies preoccupied with identify if and to what extent the EEAS is becoming a "community of communities of practice" (Bicchi, 2011, p. 1119), this article is more interested in using the three dimensions of a CoP as analytical lenses with three useful analytical dimensions to organize an analysis of individual stories about how everyday diplomacy unfolds in the EEAS. Whether the centrality of informality in training officials and conducting diplomacy is an advantage for the EEAS is debatable. I return to this discussion after the analysis. Hopefully, the article's bottom-up perspective will contribute to a more balanced assessment of the EEAS as a diplomatic service to the EU and its member states as well as highlight virtues and pitfalls in the way everyday diplomacy is practiced.

The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, I define Wenger's concept of CoP and outline how it is used as an analytical lens to organize and interpret the interview data. Using CoP as analytical lens for the analysis, I examine how individuals became EEAS officials and practice everyday diplomacy in the second part. Based on the

analysis, I discuss the virtues and pitfalls of the centrality of informality in practicing diplomacy in the EEAS.

Theory and methodology: Community of practice as analytical lens

A CoP denotes a group of individuals who “share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 4). In this case, the individuals are EEAS officials and how they interact to develop the knowledge and expertise needed to practice diplomacy and successfully pursuing EU interests.

According to Wenger (1998, p. 73), a CoP is defined by three dimensions. The first dimension concerns *mutual engagement* among individuals. It is the interactions between members engaging in whatever they are engaged in that bind them together. Being together about a function is what provides individuals with a membership—a sense of belonging—to a CoP. Importantly, mutual engagement should not be confused with homogeneity. Being the same and doing things the same way are neither preconditions nor results of mutual engagement among members of a CoP (Wenger, 1998, pp. 75–76). Instead, doing things together creates complex interrelationships among a more or less diverse group of individuals. Empirically, mutual engagement is not solely about the presence of meetings where EEAS officials discuss a draft for a common EU position on human rights violations or preparing a presentation or report to headquarters. Mutual engagement is also – and often – more informal and takes place when meeting for lunch or hanging out at the coffee machine and discussing best practices, frustrations, and stories from work with colleagues (see Nair, 2021). Mutual engagement can manifest itself in various more or less informal ways specific to the local context analyzed.

Joint enterprise is the second dimension of a CoP and denotes a sense of purpose and coherence to what the members are mutually engaged in doing (Wenger, 1998, pp. 77–82). Joint enterprise is not static, but a result of a recurring negotiation process among the members of a CoP. Importantly, what makes an enterprise joint is that it has been negotiated among the members, but not that everyone necessarily agrees (Wenger, 1998, p. 78). A joint enterprise is not negotiated in vacuum, but reflects the social, historical, and institutional contexts the members are situated in. A community develops, refines, and occasionally changes its understanding of joint enterprise in response to occurrences indo- and exogenously to the CoP. As Wenger (1998, p. 80) notes, even though a CoP originally arose in response to an outside mandate it is not given that the joint enterprise of the CoP aligns with that mandate. It is the negotiation among members and not the mandate in itself that provides a CoP with a sense of purpose. The process of negotiating joint enterprise involves also involves a process of settling who is accountable of doing what as well as how to do so appropriately (Wenger, 1998, pp. 80–81). In other words,

negotiating joint enterprise is more than finding a purpose for the group to engage in. It is also cultivating a sense of mutual accountability and logic of appropriateness among members of the CoP (Wenger, 1998, p. 78). Empirically, testimonies of joint enterprise typically came up when interviewees explained their understandings of the main tasks and priorities of the group as well as if and how these tasks and priorities were defined and communicated locally. Moreover, when they mentioned examples of diplomatic successes and failures as well as who and how success and failure were defined.

Third, the *shared repertoire* is the final defining dimension of a CoP. The shared repertoire concerns the communal resources developed by the members over time to negotiate joint enterprise and maintain mutual engagement. Such resources include—but are not limited to—routines, terminologies, skills, stories, concepts, ways of dealing with recurring problems, and tools that members use to mutually engage in a joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998, pp. 82–83). Again, the shared repertoire is not implying that members share the same beliefs or think the same way, but reflects a history of “shared points of reference” reconstructed through mutual engagement among them. That a repertoire is shared does not entail that it is without ambiguities. Importantly, the ambiguity of a shared repertoire is what enables continued negotiation of the joint enterprise and mutual engagement among its members; i.e., enables the existence of CoPs in the first place (Wenger, 1998, pp. 83–84). Empirically, statements concerning shared repertoires relate to how things are done most appropriately internally (within the section) and externally (outside the section) to succeed in realizing the joint enterprise officials are claiming to pursuing. For instance, two interviewees told, when the EU has an interest in member states taking a joint stance on a sensitive issue in an international organization (e.g., United Nations) that is expected to be a difficult sell, EEAS officials have developed a set of maneuvers to craft consensus. One such maneuver is having the least of the most concerned member states to comment first on the EEAS draft for a joint statement. That way more concerned member states would typically moderate their initial criticism and it becomes easier to reach a compromise.

To access the individual experiences of becoming a EEAS official, conducting everyday diplomacy, and how officials evaluate their practice, I conducted a series of 10 in-depth interviews with former and current as well as senior and junior EEAS officials about their daily work at the EEAS headquarters in Brussels or EU delegations abroad. I conducted the interviews in-person or online (due to the COVID-19 pandemic) from August 2019 to November 2021. Each interview lasted between one and two hours and was structured around five general topics of conversation: Reasons for becoming a EEAS official, the beginning of working in the EEAS, an outline of a typical work day in the EEAS, knowledge, experiences, and skills gained from working at the EEAS, and reflections about working at the EEAS. The topics and their order are deliberately

designed to prompt a chronological mode of storytelling (beginning, everyday diplomacy, and reflection about time at the EEAS) in order to assist the interviewees in recollecting the sequence of events, central first impressions, and key eureka moments in their individual processes of becoming a EEAS official and the conduct of everyday diplomacy.

I deliberately approached both newcomers to the EEAS and more experienced diplomats who had finished their first or second secondment at the EEAS to share their story about the everyday diplomacy EEAS. Whereas senior diplomats provided me with insights about how diplomatic practices had developed locally over time—and how the EEAS experience differed more or less from previous experiences with national and international diplomacy—newcomers shared fresh accounts of their individual processes of becoming a EEAS official. The interviews with newcomers shed light on the early learning processes when entering the EEAS forgotten or taken-for-granted by more experienced officials. The senior officials provided me with valuable reflections about how tasks and priorities had changed as well as evaluation of the appropriateness of former and current practices. The combination of interviewees with varying work experience in the EEAS provided me a thicker understanding of the “‘whys’ and ‘hows’ that underlie [the] ‘whats’” in everyday diplomacy at the headquarters and delegations (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2012, p. 48).

Striving for a frank conversation about everyday work life in the EEAS—and because such frank conversations evokes personal and sensitive topics about task, priorities, colleagues, and partners—I did not record the interviews, but made real-time jottings using pen and paper (see also Bátorá, 2013; Juncos and Pomorska, 2014). Moreover, I promised my interviewees extensive confidentiality. To avoid exposing the identities of my interviewees, I only reference the interview number and date.¹

Analysis: Everyday diplomacy in the EEAS

Given the distinctive institutional and multicultural make-up of the EEAS, it is no surprise that researchers have long been interested in the functionality of the EEAS and how it provides diplomatic services to the EU and its member states in practice. The EEAS was established as melting pot (Bátorá, 2013; Vimont, 2021). Officials brought with them not only diverse organizational cultures (Vimont, 2021), but also different working

¹ Several interviewees mentioned they had personally experienced – or heard of peers who had experienced – adverse consequences of taking with researchers about their daily work in diplomacy. Adverse consequences ranged from being told-off by a superior to being overlooked for promotion and having wishes for stationing ignored. Obviously, it is difficult for me to establish the substance of these claims. But the considerable attention paid by some of the interviewees to issues concerning confidentiality made an impression.

languages and nationalities (Henökl, 2015). The EEAS' staff consisted of officials coming from the European Commission, the Council General Secretariat, and EU member states. The EEAS must consist of a mix of permanent EU officials and temporary agents from the member states. At "least 1/3 and no more than 40%" of the EEAS officials have to be seconded from member states (European External Action Service, 2015). In 2020, the EEAS remains a melting pot. A total of 2,286 and 2,357 EEAS officials, respectively, work at the headquarters in Brussels and in the 140 EU delegations and offices abroad. Almost 40 percent of the officials working in the EEAS are recruited from the member states, while remaining staffers are coming from the EEAS and other EU institutions (European External Action Service, 2020, p. 13).

Based on the individual stories of working in the EEAS, this article uses the three key dimensions of a CoP – mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise – to organize a bottom-up analysis of how everyday diplomacy is conducted in the EEAS. After the analysis, I return to the discussion about the virtues and pitfalls of how diplomacy is conducted in relation to the EEAS' accomplishment as a useful diplomatic service to the EU and its member states.

Mutual engagement

This section examines the different ways EEAS officials mutually engage with each other to solve everyday tasks at different sections at the headquarters and delegations abroad. The most common way to mutual engage with officials in the EEAS is working together to retrieve and send information needed to produce position papers, briefings, and coordinate meetings with other officials from the EEAS, EU-institutions, EU member states, and third-party states and organizations. In addition to getting acquainted with a vast number of EU abbreviations and acronyms (e.g., DEVCO: Directorate-General "Development and Cooperation - EuropeAid" and ECHO: Directorate-General "Humanitarian Aid"), newcomers also need to learn who do what, knows what, and need to be invited (or asked for input) when preparing and coordinating so-called "good meetings."² "Good meetings" are understood as meetings resulting in agreements and are preconditioned by "good briefings."³ And a prerequisite of producing "good briefings" is access to relevant stakeholders and information.⁴

Even the planning of a meeting with a fellow EEAS colleague from another administrative unit, however, often requires a substantial amount of coordination and joint preparation among colleagues and across sections. Knowing whom to get in contact with, keep informed, and what material should be circulated before a meeting require

² Interview 1, 3, and 7 on September 24, October 21, and November 24, 2020.

³ Interview 1, 3, and 7 on September 24, October 21, and November 24, 2020.

⁴ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

significant local knowledge and was continuously highlighted by newcomers – and remembered by more experienced EEAS officials – as one of the most demanding tasks. An interviewee recalled how a “lot of time was used on finding out who do what and who knows something in the EEAS.”⁵ Similarly, another current EEAS official working in an EU delegation has often had to “call 5-6 services in order to obtain information or contacts” from headquarters.⁶ Though it is very demanding to get hold of the right people and information, one should not neglect to do so. An interviewee recalled that she had accidentally forgotten to invite a senior colleague—who was not directly relevant to the meeting, but would like to have been invited anyway—which bogged down the entire coordination process.

Because of the barriers and challenges – particularly new – EEAS officials face related to the basics of sending and retrieving information, several interviewees’ mentioned that cultivating a personal network spanning across the confines of one’s own section proved the key to success in everyday diplomacy for several former and current officials.⁷ The consequence of failing to cultivate relevant network of ties with EEAS officials in headquarters and the delegations results was a less developed understanding of “what, how and why to represent the EU” successfully.⁸

More generally, several of the interviewees noted that establishing and augmenting personal networks are two central tasks to effectively coordinate and make things happen on a daily basis.⁹ As one interviewee stressed, one needs to understand that the EEAS is one “big lobby environment.”¹⁰ Though formal procedures for how to mutually engage across institutional boundaries exist in the EEAS, formal ways of mutually engaging are often not sufficient for effective communication and coordination across sections. Reflecting on the difference between how he mutually engaged with colleagues during his time in the EEAS and with his colleagues from the national foreign ministry, he recalled the shock from learning how normal it was to informally share information among EEAS officials from various sections. He laughed as he was telling about an

⁵ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

⁶ Interview 2, September 29, 2020.

⁷ According to the experience of one interviewee who previously worked in the EEAS headquarters, the result of the unintelligible chains of command and information flows meant that dysfunctional patterns of behavior among well-intentioned officials occasionally emerged. For instance, the general hardship of obtaining relevant information made some staffers keep important knowledge to themselves, because “knowledge is power” and others knowing that you know something you cannot tell is a sign of higher status vis-à-vis peers (Interview 1, September 24, 2020).

⁸ Interview 3, October 21, 2020.

⁹ Interview 1, 3, and 6 on September 24, October 21, and November 20, 2020.

¹⁰ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

episode from the beginning at his time in the EEAS, where his superior had to give him a direct order to share an otherwise confidential briefing about the distribution of EU member states' development aid with other officials from the EEAS and member states. Having been at the EEAS for a while, he had his eureka moment when he understood that what seemed to be outright wrong and in contradiction with everything he had learned as a young national diplomat was an informal way of compensating for the lack of functional official channels for the exchange of information. The official EEAS information channels were slow because they were overly formalized and not up-to-date. Instead an informal culture of sharing "everything with everyone" was what really made things work:

It [sharing what should officially not be shared, ed.] makes all the underlying structures work! Everybody needs and would like to have a draft and then one can begin to work on a position for an upcoming meeting. The EU does not work without [informally, ed.] sharing and the official channels for sharing information are not working properly.¹¹

Consequently, interviewees working in headquarters and delegations frequently emphasized the importance of spending a significant amount of time on establishing and maintaining a personal network with people with different national and cultural backgrounds in the EEAS as well as acquaintances from EU institutions, member states, and – if relevant – officials from non-EU states.¹² Establishing a network compiled of officials from different member states and cultures seem to be important, because these ties offer cultural shortcuts to understand that there are significant cultural differences between the people working at the EEAS. If one "comes down to Brussels and thinks we are all Europeans and alike," the interviewee explained, one risks understanding way too late that "Europe is enormous and a lot of things!"¹³ Several of the interviewees had experienced obstructing access to important information or stalling a coordination process, because they had failed to ask someone to comment or approve of a draft.¹⁴ Whereas it would be inappropriate to ask a superior to comment or approve of a draft in some member states, it would be considered a sign of disrespect not doing so in other member states. By establishing social ties across different nationalities and organizational cultures, one not only gain a better understanding of who does what, when and how in the EEAS as an organization, but also more quickly learn to navigate the organization's multicultural make-up and develop an understanding of who to ask

¹¹ Interview 6, November 20, 2020.

¹² Interview 3, 6 and 7 on October 21, November 20, and November 24, 2020.

¹³ Interview 6, November 20, 2020.

¹⁴ For instance, an interviewee recalls how a "15 page document had been negotiated back and forth for more than a year," because an offended senior official was blocking its adoption (Interview 6, November 20, 2020).

or invite and—as importantly—who not to involve at certain stages of preparing and coordinating a meeting.

The bulk of mutual engagement with people outside the interviewees' local work places took place after hours. One interviewee said she meet privately and watched movies with a group a people who worked as representatives from the EU member state she was born in and representatives from the EU member state neighboring her own home country. Between eating popcorn, drinking beers, and chats about big and important things going on in their personal lives, the group would discuss work-related topics as well as exchanging information concerning ongoing negotiations, and the dos and don'ts in relation to how to deal with specific member state representatives. More frequently, however, interviewees said they maintained and expanded their personal networks before and during meetings talking in the corridors.

Moreover, after meetings – interviewees told – officials would meet with old and new acquaintances for lunch, coffee or dinner and drinks. One former EEAS official seconded to headquarters recalls how she – in addition to cultivating her own network – collaborated with her head of section seconded from another EU member state.¹⁵ She noted that it was an advantage that the boss and she came from different member states and “had different approaches to creating a good network.”¹⁶ He enjoyed social gatherings and was good at establishing informal ties at these, which she could benefit from afterwards. Her style of networking focused on cultivating ties with other officials from the EEAS and the Commission in more professional settings where she clearly demonstrated her professional competencies about various subject matters. Afterwards, her boss could then benefit from the contacts she had made in professional settings. She recalls that the multicultural make-up of the EEAS meant that it was crucial “to cultivate a network across nationalities.” As a result, a former EEAS official stressed, “30-40 pct. of the job is networking and you have to learn to bend the rules” otherwise you will never learn to meaningfully navigate the “chaos we are working in.”¹⁷

In lieu of effective officials channels of communication within headquarters and between the delegations abroad and headquarters, current and former EEAS officials highlighted the centrality of informal ways to mutually engage with colleagues from and beyond one's section. Consequently, establishing and maintaining a diverse personal network was key to efficient and frictionless planning of meetings with concrete results. Some newcomers to the EEAS knew this from previous secondments at multilateral organization (e.g., the United Nations), whereas others were told by more experienced

¹⁵ Interview 6, November 20, 2020.

¹⁶ Interview 6, November 20, 2020.

¹⁷ Interview 3, October 21, 2020.

colleagues from the office. The centrality of then informal ways to mutually engage in order to get things done was also stressed by the interviewees whose personal experiences of becoming and being a EEAS official was marked by isolation and frustration.

For instance, “John” told he was initially excited about being seconded to a section in the EEAS headquarters dealing with substantial issues that he was very invested in.¹⁸ Unlike several of the other interviewees, “John” never had his eureka moment and realized how informal ways of engaging with each other compensated for the lack of effective official channels. Instead, “John” insisted on using official protocols and communication channels to engage with fellow officials in the EEAS and partners beyond. “John” recalled how he grew increasingly frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the EEAS. The EEAS was nothing like the national foreign ministry where he came from. Though “John” was aware of the fact it was “broadly accepted” to share sensitive information with other officials and member state representatives, “John” decided not to. Unlike the other interviewees, “John” did not share experiences about chit-chatting with colleagues in the corridors, afterhours dinners, and movie nights. From the conversation with “John” – and from another interview recalling encounters with “John” when he was with the EEAS – it was clear that “John” was not comfortable with the informal ways of engaging with his colleagues. As our conversation was coming to an end, “John” reflected on the three years he spent in the EEAS. He enjoyed that the EEAS allowed him the time to immerse himself into a part of the world he had always been very interested in – and would not dismiss another secondment in the future – but also recalled the significant frustrations stemming from the EEAS’ “outdated” infrastructure for sharing information and all the “problems” the informal ways to compensate for the lack of official ways to mutually engage created.

Several interviewees mentioned examples of “Johns” who could simply not adjust to the “fact” that the “EU and Brussels are completely network-based,” which influenced their ability to participate in the process of creating, getting, and solving activities at work.¹⁹ Another interviewee similarly notes that those who “never learned the rules of the game [...] they never managed well.”²⁰ Whether or not the broadly accepted informal ways of engaging with officials within and beyond the EEAS were endorsed or not by the interviewees, the substantial amount of time used to ventilate frustrations or cherish the personal network established is a key testimony of the centrality such informal practice in how everyday diplomacy has been conducted in the EEAS from its creation until

¹⁸ Interview B, November 16, 2020.

¹⁹ Interview 3, October 21, 2020.

²⁰ Interview 6, November 20, 2020.

today. In addition to the mutual engagement with EEAS officials in the same section, the mutual engagement with people from other sections in and beyond the EEAS as well as from various member states and cultures is a key component in everyday diplomacy.

Shared repertoire

This section elucidates key elements of shared repertoires – e.g., the communal resources shared among EEAS officials in a section – which EEAS officials have developed locally to practice diplomacy most optimally. As mentioned in the previous section about mutual engagement, the formal ways to send and receive relevant information in the EEAS are ineffective. At the individual level, many EEAS officials establish personal networks to compensate for the inefficient formal information channels. At the collective level, EEAS officials have developed a number of local “best practices” tailored to alleviate common challenges and exploit opportunities faced in everyday diplomacy at the local level.

Some of the smaller and less prominent EU delegations often face significant difficulties in maintaining contact with the headquarters in Brussels. “One repeatedly calls the mothership [headquarters, edt.] for instructions, but you do not receive a reply”, an interviewee formulated the problem to me.²¹ To establish a steady line of communication to Brussels – and receive information about policy-making and internal changes in the organization – some head of missions and delegations have begun to recruit officials – about to finish their secondment – for a new secondment at the EEAS headquarters. For instance, a former EEAS official²² told that after ending her secondment at an undisclosed EU delegation the head of delegation worked his network to second the former employee to the headquarters. By seconding the former delegation employee to the headquarters, the head of delegation tried to alleviate some of the informational barriers between delegations and headquarters by having his “own man in Brussels.” While working fulltime at an office in headquarters, the former employee unofficially liaised between individuals at headquarters and the head of delegation.

Another example of a prominent shared “best practice” is disclosed by EEAS officials working in international organizations where the EU is present alongside its member-states (e.g., the United Nations). A primary task of EEAS officials in these international organizations is to coordinate consensus among EU member states. Before the EU delegation can make a strong joint statement in an international organization, there needs to be unanimity behind it. Depending on the subject of the joint statement, this is a very demanding task of the EEAS officials. As an interviewee notes that coordinating consensus among EU 27 on sensitive issues (e.g., LGBT+-rights) resembles a “mission

²¹ Interview A, August 9, 2019.

²² Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

impossible.”²³ Neither the EU nor member states are formally obliged to cooperate in multilateral forums. But from interviews with EEAS officials and member state representatives, there are many benefits from cooperating in general. When standing united in multilateral forums, the group of EU member states can fill the floor with “positive statements and secure a deal.”²⁴ To secure consensus on sensitive matter, an interviewee told, officials need to consult the “right countries and ask them to say the right things in the right order.”²⁵ Having the “right countries” establish “common direction and ground” it becomes way easier to negotiate consensus among the remaining EU27.²⁶ And if the same EU member states repeatedly try to sabotage a joint statement, a number of “best practices” have also been tailored to address such problems. For instance, one such “best practice” in the repertoire used by EEAS officials at the local level for dealing with member states refusing to collaborate is exposing their objections to the wider group of member states.²⁷ The member state is asked to account for the points of disagreements in plenum. Initially, exposure is taking place at the level of lower ranking diplomats. If agreement is not reached at the lower level, the member state is asked to account for the points of disagreement at the level of ambassadors. In those rare cases where disagreement is not reached among ambassadors, the discussion about the disagreement moves to the agenda of the European Council where the minister representing the non-collaborating member state has to argue their case face-to-face with their counterparts from the other EU states.

Seen from the bottom-up, the two examples illustrate that EEAS officials are jointly developing sets of “best practices” to deal with the specific challenges and opportunities they commonly face in their local context. Besides drawing on more or less developed personal networks, EEAS officials collectively engage in developing a shared repertoire of “best practices” tailored for the local context.

Joint enterprise

Testimonies of the continually negotiation of joint enterprise are conspicuous in the interviews with current and former EEAS officials. With sparse directions and instructions from the EEAS leadership in Brussels, officials experience having significant discretion in defining the purpose of their daily work. Whereas less experienced interviewees²⁸ tend to emphasize the initial surprise and sometimes even frustrations of how few direct instructions are coming from “above” the senior levels of the EEAS, more

²³ Interview 7, November 24, 2020.

²⁴ Interview 2, September 29, 2020.

²⁵ Interview 7, November 24, 2020.

²⁶ Interview 7, November 24, 2020.

²⁷ Interview 7, November 24, 2020.

²⁸ Interview 1 and 2 on September 24 and September 29, 2020.

experienced interviewees point out the virtues of making decisions on what an EU position ought to be on an issue among peers with more local knowledge on the subject matter.²⁹ Sometimes senior officials serving as head of sections at headquarters or delegations abroad will independently interpret the mandates coming from above and translate them into clearly priorities tasks and positions. But as frequently, local leadership will leave the interpretation of external mandates and translation into meaningful work tasks to subordinate officials.

With few clear mandates coming from Brussels to be interpreted and translated locally – particularly if serving in a section or delegation with weak or invisible leadership – interviewees noted it was – and still is – important to quickly develop what was often referred to as an “intuitive sense” about what the EU’s position might be on the issues one deal with on a daily basis. The less clear external mandates from Brussels and the weaker the local leadership, the more important intuition becomes. Unlike the officials working in the EU Commission, an interviewee notes, the permanent “EEAS officials are not so much hands-on” regarding finding an EU position.³⁰ Some newcomers have easier access to the information and stakeholders needed to develop an intuitive understanding of what aligns with the EU’s interests than others. Some officials ending their secondment spent time on compiling and updating a list of useful contacts. One of the interviewees found such a list to be a very helpful informal way to alleviate what she experienced as the “fact that it is difficult to learn how the EEAS makes decisions.”³¹ However, in case of a list of relevant contacts have not been made available, newcomers need to establish a network on their own or together with peers and senior colleagues.

Occasionally, however, officials recall realizing that locally negotiated goals – for instance in an EU delegation or a section in Brussels – contradicted with instructions suddenly coming from headquarters. Often such misunderstandings arose when EEAS headquarters and delegations send mixed signals to non-EU third parties.³² The core of such conflicts are often not so much about the content of the mixed signals, but rather that the existence of mixed signals accentuates an already existing critique of the EEAS not being a “unified actor” in world politics.³³ And several interviewees also agree that it is difficult to tell what actually defines the aims of a common EU foreign policy:

It’s hard to know what the EU’s foreign policy is [...]. I participated in a five days course about the EEAS and its Integrated Approach [a central foreign policy concept

²⁹ Interview 3 and 6 on October 21 and November 20, 2020.

³⁰ Interview 2, September 29, 2020.

³¹ Interview 2, September 29, 2020.

³² Interview 1 and Interview 7 on September 24 and November 24, 2020.

³³ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

in EEAS strategy documents, ed.], but I was still not sure what that concretely meant.³⁴

This interviewee's difficulties in extracting what the EU's foreign policy is and what EU goals should direct her daily work on advancing EU positions are symptomatic for the seemingly general lack of well-functioning formal information channels and intelligible structure of the organization. Where EEAS officials compensated the lack of efficient formal ways of mutually engaging with informal ones, some officials tried to alleviate the adverse consequences on everyday diplomatic practice from missing external mandates – and absence of strong local leadership – by developing an intuitive sense of what the EU's position ought to be on specific issues officials are dealing with. More troublesome, however, one interviewee told that officials experiencing being sanctioned for having “misunderstood” a vaguely defined external mandate from headquarters decided to perform less effectively, because they were very afraid to make mistakes. As a consequence, some officials would rather “do something right and do less than doing too much and wrong.”³⁵

How everyday diplomacy is practiced in the EEAS

Seen from the bottom-up, the EEAS officials' stories offer insights about the numerous challenges they face in everyday diplomacy as well as ways to deal with these. A key challenge is the lack of official and formalized channels of information and communication. Mutual engagement with officials within and beyond the EEAS is significantly reliant on creation and maintenance of personal networks as informal ways to compensate for the lack of efficient formal ones. In addition to the adverse consequences for daily mutual engagements needed to practicing key element of diplomacy – preparing “good briefings” and hosting “good meetings” – the lack of efficient formal communication and information in the EEAS also influence the way EEAS officials negotiate joint enterprise locally. In those cases where strong leaders are absent at the local section in Brussels or abroad, EEAS officials have wide degrees of discretion to interpret external mandates from the EEAS headquarters into meaningful work tasks. Consequently, officials frequently mention that it is important to quickly develop a “sense of intuition” about what would be the right EU position on the specific area and concrete issues one deals with daily. Finally, the analysis illustrates that EEAS officials – in addition to their personal networks – have collectively developed shared repertoires of “best practices” tailored for meeting local challenges and opportunities from their respective perspectives.

³⁴ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

³⁵ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

Conclusion and Discussion: On the virtues and pitfalls of how everyday diplomacy is practiced in the EEAS

The analysis illustrated how EEAS officials have found numerous informal individual and collective ways to remedy for the lack of efficient official lines of communication and information between sections at the headquarters as well as between headquarters and delegations abroad. Based on the individual stories from current and former EEAS officials, the process of becoming an official and practicing everyday diplomacy are from uniform. However, the lack of an officially standardized ways of practicing diplomacy in the EEAS means that newcomers – as an interviewee formulated it – use a significant amount of time on learning “who do what and who knows something in the EEAS.”³⁶ Moreover, newcomers spent substantial time on developing an “intuitive sense” about what the EU’s position might be on the issues one is dealing with on a daily basis.

According to the interviewees, the most immediate way to improve the function and practices of the EEAS – as a whole – was to improve the formal ways information and knowledge are shared within the diplomatic service. Particularly, the communication between the headquarters in Brussels and delegations abroad. None of the interviewees called for a stronger sense of esprit de corps when I asked them to reflect on the problems the EEAS are facing and possible ways to improve. The lack of mentioning esprit de corps, however, does not invalidate that a stronger sense of esprit de corps could indeed improve the EEAS. Particularly with respect to the often mentioned need to hastily develop an intuitive sense of what the EU’s position ought to be, the individual held beliefs and values informing officials current understanding the EU’s role and purpose in world politics and on specific issues could benefit from a more standardized way of understanding these.

The statements about a frequent lack of clear mandates from headquarters to sections and delegations leaving the individual official with significant discretion to determine what is in the best interest of the EU highlights a potential pitfall of how diplomacy is practiced: A seeming lack of democratic control with the EEAS. In lieu of clear external mandates and lack of local leadership, how can we know that the foreign policy goals adopted politically are implemented by the officials locally? Even if assuming a EEAS official loyally works toward realizing the best local outcome for the EU, the chance of a successful outcome hinges very much on the individual officials’ local knowledgeable, relevant personal network, and previous diplomatic experience. Some discretion for agents to adapt strategic goals formulated at the top of a large organization to the local conditions at the bottom is appropriate, but if top and bottom of a hierarchical political

³⁶ Interview 1, September 24, 2020.

institution becomes misaligned it may pose a problem from an administrative and democratic perspective. Based on individuals stories about how external mandates are often lacking or vague in everyday diplomacy, future research should look further into how external mandates from headquarters are implemented locally in the EEAS.

On the positive side, the ways EEAS officials have reacted to the original shock of the lack of effective internal communication lines and top-down managerial control also highlight a key virtue of the EEAS: Adaptability. Servicing a political institution trying to navigate the shifting goals and interests of multiple political patrons (e.g., the Commission, Council, and Parliament) themselves characterized by internal division (see Vimont, 2021; Jørgensen *et al.*, 2022), it is impressive to listen to how much resources and time officials – frequently working afterhours – devote to make ends meet and secure the EU the best possible outcome in local conditions. As Graham Allison (1999, chap. 3) argues, organizational coherence enables performing routinized tasks effectively. However, strong coherence also makes it difficult for organizations to adjust to changing goals and new procedures. From the bottom-up, it may exactly be the diverse composition of officials with various multinational and – cultural backgrounds situated in an institution that is inherently interstitial (Bátora, 2013) and hybrid (Henökl, 2015; Vimont, 2021), which makes the EEAS a promising diplomatic service to the EU and member states approaching an increasingly post-Westphalian world characterized by an atomization of foreign policy issues, goals, and means (see also Bull, 2002, pt. 3; Uilenreef, 2014; Bátora and Spence, 2015).

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