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The EU's Voice in Third Countries

The EU Delegations around the World

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When the Lisbon Treaty came into force in December 2009, one of the first changes to be introduced was the upgrading of Delegations of the European Commission to fully-fledged Delegations of the European Union (EU). Thanks to the fact that the EU received a legal personality (Art. 47 TEU), the Commission offices were turned into diplomatic houses representing the entire EU, and not just one of its institutions, vis-à-vis third countries. The actual upgrading process took several months to complete with some Delegations turning into the “EU’s embassies” overnight on Day 1 (India)², while others followed later (China)³ and/or were delayed due to practical concerns such as moving the buildings (USA).⁴ Nonetheless, all of the upgrades were completed before the creation of its diplomatic headquarters, the European External Action Service (EEAS), in Brussels.

In some senses the change in the EU’s diplomatic system abroad was intended only as a sort of byproduct of the key changes that were supposed to take place in Brussels. Despite – or perhaps because of – this fact EU Delegations have been out of the limelight. Indeed, this paper argues that away from the glare of publicity, EU Delegations have been much more successful in

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² Interview, senior official, EU Delegation, New Delhi, 4 April 2014.

³ Interview, senior official, EU Delegation, Beijing, 9 January 2013.

⁴ Interview, senior official, EEAS, Brussels, 10 December 2012.

promoting an EU single foreign policy both in relation to EU Member States and, primarily, to the partner non-EU countries.

From a theoretical perspective, the development of Delegations from representing mainly the economic interests of the European Communities (EC) and the Commission to bodies that should promote a single European foreign policy and represent the entire EU to some extent feeds into debates surrounding the notion of 'spillover' first developed in neo-functionalist accounts (Haas, 1968). Nonetheless, this paper seeks not to theorize but to contribute to theory building. Indeed, the major goal of this paper, therefore, is not to look into intricacies of theorizing about European integration, but to look at changes on the ground.

As Menon (2014) has argued recently, the choice confronting EU Member States is between 'collective empowerment and autonomous decline', but as Menon maintains so far Member States have largely plumped for the latter, emphasizing the 'pursuit of narrow national interests over effective multilateral action'. Although discussion surrounding these themes has hitherto focused on national capitals and the Brussels EEAS HQ, EU Delegations deserve to be factored in here. Many of the nuts, bolts and levers of the machine of multilateral action are found in the Delegations.

Some Member States have welcomed the changes brought by Lisbon and indeed overall Member States have tended to be more welcoming of the role of the Delegations than of the EEAS Brussels HQ. Smaller states in particular do not view the Delegations as wanting to run their foreign policy⁵, but rather as a source of 'added value', be it through better reporting that smaller MS can incorporate into their own reports back home (Maurer & Raik, 2014), or through better access to more senior officials in third countries' administrations which EU Delegations are able to ensure. Nonetheless, how EU Member States view the Delegations is only one side of the coin of foreign relations. On the other side, we need to ask how EU Delegations are viewed by host countries. Do they, for instance, have the same clout in Washington as in Ouagadougou?

To complement the excellent scholarship which has largely focused on the developments of the EEAS and the achievements (or otherwise) of Catherine Ashton (e.g. Helwig, 2013; Barber, 2010; Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet & Rüger, 2011), this paper contributes to an assessment of the performance of the EEAS

⁵ Informal conversation, national diplomat, Washington DC, 15 May 2012.

by shining a spotlight on the Delegations. It examines the almost “surreptitious” transition from Commission to EU Delegations and inquires how EU Delegations exert their influence and how their influence is viewed by their host states after being upgraded. Although there have been significant contributions to the literature examining EU Delegations (Dialer et al., 2014; Comelli & Matarazzo, 2011; Carta, 2013), particularly when looking at individual case studies of Delegations in one or two host countries (Maurer and Raik, 2014; Austermann, 2012), there is no systematic evaluation of how the role of Delegations shifted after the Lisbon Treaty came into force.

This paper therefore provides an analysis of EU Delegations from the perspective of interaction with host third countries. Although it is important to examine and assess the internal coordination between EU Delegations and EEAS HQ as well as with EU-28 Member States as some of the current studies do (Balfour & Raik, 2013b; Bicchi, 2014), it is in a sense more essential to see whether EU Delegations have now more impact on creation and voicing of EU foreign policy abroad and how this impact is viewed by the third countries, particularly whether there is any difference at all to the pre-Lisbon arrangements. Is the EU's voice in third countries nowadays heard more and in unison (or at least harmony) or (still) rather as a discordant cacophony?

The paper fills this void in literature by offering some potential avenues through which we can look at the way in which the third countries see the EU Delegations. It also conceptualizes the key issues which make a difference whether or not an EU Delegation is successful and “heard” by its host and offers numerous hypotheses. As the research project upon which this study is built is still on-going, the hypotheses are offered more in the spirit of a contribution to the debate than the basis of a systematic testing. Moreover, from a practical perspective, given the upcoming EP elections and resulting new distribution of posts, including an HRVP, practitioners both from EU institutions and Member States may find it useful to look at which EU Delegations are successful and why and how their impact can be assessed five years on since their inauguration which is, in effect, a year longer than the EEAS's existence. Moreover, a new HRVP can take guidance from the first five years of EU Delegations' functioning for possible reforms to be proposed by the end of 2015 (European External Action Service, 2013).

The paper builds on formal and informal interviews and discussions with more than 30 EU officials from EU Delegations in Washington DC, Beijing, New Delhi and Tunisia, EU officials based at the EEAS HQ in Brussels, the

Commission (DG Devco and DG Trade) as well as a number of national diplomats posted in destinations where EU Delegations has been scrutinized. The interviews were semi-structured, conducted in English, German, French and Czech to qualify the picture and to gather truly original data. The interviews confirm data and crosscheck information, whilst also garnering inside knowledge and participants' perceptions.

The paper firstly outlines the general changes in the role of EU Delegations around the world; it then proceeds by looking at their political leverage and, thirdly, the economic power through development aid and pre-accession assistance. Throughout, primarily the case studies of EU Delegations in Washington and Beijing are referred to with a number of other shadow comparisons. The fourth section uses the case of New Delhi as a control case and examines what India can tell us about the impact of EU Delegations (and, in fact, EU foreign policy) in general. The conclusion suggests some lessons for EEAS and a new HR/VP.