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Perceptions of the EU in international institutions

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With a 17 per cent share of world trade (34 percent with intra-EU trade), the European Union (EU) is the world’s biggest trade actor. Moreover, the EU is the main donor in humanitarian assistance – supporting around 18 million people in 60 countries per year – and its support for peacekeeping missions spans through several regions of the planet, from Africa to Asia and the Middle East. A central promoter for programs of democracy and human rights promotion, the EU is active also in development cooperation and in the protection of the environment. In order to pursue these policies, the Union has established a wide range of partnerships, interregional dialogues, presence (with a different status and combination of EU and member states’ membership (cf. Missiroli, 2010: 449–52) in international organisations (Blavoukos and Bourantonis, 2011; Jørgensen, 2008) and has supported the creation of international agencies such as the International Criminal Court (Broomhall, 2003), thereby accomplishing what is considered to be its ‘ontological multilateralism’.

Reflective of these statistics, the EU for some time has been engaged in a process of self-representation as a global player of a distinctive type. The EU’s official documents and public statements have made frequent reference to the EU’s global stance as a profoundly ‘different’ one, which – due to its cultural roots, history and institutional framework – promotes positive values and collective norms. In trying to describe this exceptionalism, experts and commentators have resorted to various labels such as civilian power (Duchêne, 1972; Whitman, 1998; Telò, 2006), normative power (Manners, 2002), gentle power (Padoa-Schioppa, 2001) and Scandinavia of the world (Therborn, 2001). The fundamental components of this distinctiveness can be summarised as follows: a preference for long-term non-military instruments aimed mainly at structural prevention; a specific translation of its values and norms in its foreign policy; an ability to influence the international normative environment through example and active policies; a preference for multilateralism with respect to unilateralism. Such a distinctive stance in world politics, constitutive of the EU’s ‘international identity’ has been by and large assumed to be recognised by the international actors with whom the EU interacts. However, the ‘difference’ thesis has been challenged both from a theoretical (Diez, 2005; Sjursen, 2006; Hyde–Price, 2006) and an empirical viewpoint (e.g. Bicchi, 2006; Smith, 2006; Panebianco, 2006; Wagnsson, 2010). While the desirability of adopting a soft power approach is called into question more and more frequently (as in the case of the weak EU’s response to the so called Arab Spring of 2011) and...
the credibility of the EU has been put under strain even as far as internal economic solidarity is concerned, the idea that the EU is a power of a distinctive sort has not been abandoned.

Arguably, however, this thesis is deeply Eurocentric: it has been developed by European scholars, corroborated by European policymakers and founded on allegedly European values. Yet, the EU’s alleged ‘international identity’ is not such if its main elements are limited to the opinion of a few European academics and policy-makers. The identity of as complex an animal as the EU is by definition socially constructed in interaction with the relevant actors involved: the relevant external Others and – in the case of a collectivity – the people belonging to that community.

The first, important, reason to study the external images of the EU, therefore, is the fact that such images are part of a process of self-identification of the Europeans as a political group. As a matter of fact, political identity is not only constructed inside, around aggregating factors such as the recognition of such as common past and shared future, the sharing of values, the legitimisation of common institutions, and the definition of policies (cf. Checkel and Katzenstein, 2009; Lucarelli, Cerutti and Schmidt, 2011; Risse, 2010); it is also constructed in the interaction with the outside, in the concrete policies undertaken by the EU, with their burden of values, principles and interests (Lucarelli and Manners, 2006); in the definition of a set of (possibly conflicting) external roles (Elgström and Smith, 2006; Bretherton and Vogler, 2006: 37–51); in the interaction with external Others (Lucarelli, 2008), who grant (or not) recognition to the EU and its role in the world, project their own representation of the Union and interact with it accordingly. Of all the literature on the EU’s identity only a small part looks at the EU’s interaction with the world (exceptions include Cederman, 2001; Meyer, 2010; Lucarelli, 2008) and even a smaller portion devotes attention to the role of external images in the process of identity formation.

The second reason to undertake research in this field is the importance of grasping external images for a broad understanding of the EU’s role in the world. The attention of the literature on the external role of the EU has been devoted to the relationship between the Union and the member states in foreign policy, the EU’s decision-making process and relations among the Union’s institutions, the impact of EU’s policies, all this in the broad EU system of foreign policy or in specific issue areas (for reviews of the area, see Jørgensen, Pollack, Rosamond, 2006 part IV; Wunderlich and Bailey, 2011; Smith, 2008; Hill and Smith, 2011). The literature is rich and variegated, but compartmentalised and with gaps. One such gap is the analysis of what the world thinks of the EU and of its international role.

The third reason to undertake an analysis of the external perceptions of the EU is their impact on the effectiveness of the EU’s policies. In a world in which the emerging powers as well as elements of civil society are demanding a change in the global governance, the role that the EU is and will be able to play in such a governance as well as in policies targeted to specific areas depends also on the way in which the EU is perceived by the other actors involved. In other words, what the world thinks of the EU is an important factor in facilitating or opposing the achievements of EU-sponsored policies. Comprehending the perceptions of the EU can help gauge the extent to which the Union is seen as a credible, consistent and legitimate actor in global politics. Furthermore, they can also help assess the extent to which the external world regards the EU’s role in world politics as really ‘distinctive’. As noticed by Ole Elgström, there is a close relationship between external images, legitimacy, effectiveness and distinctiveness: ‘[w]hen the EU tries to lead in multilateral negotiations, it needs followers. The tendency to follow the EU increases if the Union’s policies are seen as coherent and consistent and if they are considered legitimate [and legitimacy] is [...] defined by others’ perceptions [...]. Furthermore, an actor that is perceived to be legitimate has to use less tangible power [and] base its support on normative consent, in line with advocacy for a consistent effort of the EU to act as a “different”, civilian power’ (Elgström, 2007b: 952).
The latter reflection suggests that there is also a directly policy-oriented reason to study the EU’s external image: such an analysis does not only add useful material to the analysis of the studies on European identity and EU’s foreign policy, but provides a fundamental knowledge for the EU’s political elite to ameliorate its interaction with the external world.

But whose perceptions are we talking about? The limited literature that has analysed the external perceptions of the EU has dealt mainly with states and, in the case of the broadest studies, with the national general public, the media and the elites. However, what seems to be an even more promising avenue of research looks at the perception of the elites that have closer interaction with the EU in multilateral fora. The reason has to do with the two functions mentioned above. In the first place, it is more likely that what enters the public debate and influences the self-identification process of the Europeans is the view of specific elites, whose voice is more likely to be reported by the European media and to enter the public debate. In the second place, it is in multilateral settings, the fora of negotiation, where reputation is most relevant in order to achieve an aim.

Despite the fact that the literature on negotiation and bargaining recognises the importance of perceptions, reputation and the like (Cohen, 1999; Mercer, 1996), the number of scholars that have actively engaged in the analysis of perceptions of the EU in multilateral fora is incredibly limited. This chapter will review their work within the wider context of the literature on the EU’s external images at large.

**The state of the art**

A general reference to how the EU is regarded is not novel for the analysis of the EU as a global actor. In his analysis of the gap between expectations and capabilities of the EU, Christopher Hill assumed that the image that the EU conveyed externally was one which created expectations higher than its actual capabilities (Hill, 1993). In their 1999 book on the EU as a global actor, Bretherton and Vogler made reference to the images of the EU that emerged among the third party representatives that they had interviewed. Analogously, the literature on the EU’s distinctiveness *de facto* assumes that the EU is recognised to be a special player. However, in order to find a systematic study of the external perceptions of the EU one has to wait until the mid 2000s, when the first publications of this type of research appeared (Ortega, 2004). At the time three independent research projects had just started (coordinated, respectively, by Martin Holland and Natalia Chaban; Sonia Lucarelli; and Ole Elgström) and some spot contributions were published (Men, 2006; Lisbonne-de Vergeron, 2006). More recently, some other contributions have appeared and the EU has founded two research projects devoted to the analysis of the perception of the EU respectively in China (*Disaggregating Chinese Perception of the EU and Implications for the EU’s China Policy*) and worldwide among non-European students (*EuroBroadMap*). Of all this literature, however, only a very small part is specifically dedicated to the analysis of images of the EU in international institutions. In what follows I will briefly illustrate the characteristics of the main research projects in the field, before passing to present their main results.

A pioneering study on the external images of the EU was elaborated at the European Union Institute for Security Studies (EU–ISS) under the coordination of Martin Ortega (2004). Perspectives from Africa (South Africa and Senegal), Latin America (Brazil and Mexico), Asia (China and Japan), the Pacific Area (New Zealand) and Asia were surveyed. The focus, however, was more on the relations of the country with respect to the EU given its position in the current international system and the trends of transformation of the global order. Images and perceptions were in a sense deducted from this broad scenario. There was not a shared methodology, nor the identification of specific sources of target groups within the country. Despite these limits,
the collection represented the first publication specifically devoted at comparing views of the
EU outside Europe. Slightly later, some other spot studies on the image of the EU in a specific
country appeared (Lisbonne-de Vergeron, 2006, 2007; Tsuruoka, 2006; Men, 2006). These
works were not comparative in themselves, nor part of a comparative effort. In most cases the
methodology and sources used were not clarified apart from the case of Men’s analysis of images
of the EU in academic reviews (2006). For instance in the study on Indian views, Lisbonne-de
Vergeron affirms only that the report was based on ‘a range of conversation’, not specifying
what type of people were interviewed. A later contribution sharing the same vagueness as well
as sources are concerned dealt with the interesting topic of ENP countries (Benediek, 2008).

The first systematic analysis of the EU’s external perceptions has been undertaken by Martin
Holland and Nathalia Chaban at the National Centre for Research on Europe (NCRE) of the
University of Canterbury (NZ). The NCRE programme is the largest on the topic. With the
sponsorship of the EU (mainly DG for Education and Culture of the European Commission),
the Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore, and the NCRE itself, the NCRE Programme has
investigated perceptions of the EU in the Asia-Pacific region (then also in Africa). Started in
2002, the research programme first dealt with New Zealand and then – with the project Public,
Elite and Media Perceptions of the EU in Asia Pacific Region: A Comparative Study (2004–5) – it was
broadened to include Australia, New Zealand, South Korea and Thailand. The subsequent
project (2006–8) dealt with the images of the EU as a ‘development actor’ in three regions with
whom the EU has different relations (Pacific, Asia and Africa). The next project – The EU in
the Eyes of Asia (2006–11) – involved twelve Asian countries. The last, ongoing, project started
in 2011 and deals with images of the EU after Lisbon in ten countries of the Asia-Europe
Meeting (ASEM).

The key areas of investigation are the EU’s economic and political external relations, agri-
culture, environment, regulatory regimes, security, society and development cooperation. The
research design is well defined and replicated in the various projects of the programme. It
consists of the analysis of EU imagery and perceptions in three areas in each country: the public
opinion, the news media representations and the elites’ views. Perceptions of the EU among the
general public are gathered through interviews (most of the time by telephone, more recently
also through Internet panel surveys, where necessary face-to-face) to a representative sample of
the population. The analysis of opinion polls aims at investigating the degree of knowledge and
appreciation of the EU and its policies, the images associated to the EU and the respondents’
perception of the EU’s relevance in the world, with a view of intersecting the answer to these
questions with the personal profile of the interviewed or his/her nationality. The analysis of the
media explores the daily coverage for the EU and its institutions and ASEM. It covers both
the press (at least three newspapers per country) and TV (primetime news on about two channels
per country). Media analysis looks at several dimensions of the EU’s images, among which: the
level of presence of the EU, the intensity of the EU’s representation, sources of EU news, the
geo-political context in which news of the EU appear (international vs. domestic vs. regional
contexts), the textual and visual images most frequently associated with the EU, the most fre-
quent topics, the type of evaluation (positive/negative/neutral). Perceptions of the EU among
the elites are gathered through semi-structured in-depth face-to-face interviews with people
from political, business, media and civil society circles. The standardisation of the methodology
allowed the creation of a sort of data bank on images of the EU in different countries and
among different constituencies. In terms of the topic of this chapter, the NCRE programme is
relevant to the extent that some information can be gathered on the general perception of the
EU abroad, its credibility as a multilateral player; however no specific attention has been
devoted to the perception of the EU in international organisations.
A second, broad range programme on the external image of the EU was undertaken in the context of the Network of Excellence Global Governance, Regionalisation and Regulation: The Role of the EU – GARNET (EU 6th Framework Programme 2005–10 – www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/garnet/). The two-phase project, based at the Forum on the Problems of Peace and War in Florence, was directed by Sonia Lucarelli, then joined by Lorenzo Fioramonti. The External Image of the European Union project involved 26 researchers, based in 16 countries. The focus was on the perception of the both within a sample of 16 relevant extra-European countries in the four continents and within a set of international and seven transnational actors, including international organisations – the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the World Bank (WB), the African Union (AU), ACP countries negotiating with the EU for the European Partnership Agreements (EPAs), Al Jazeera, NGOs taking part in world gatherings. The choice to include non-state actors aimed precisely at starting to fill a gap in the literature by exploring images of the EU both in multilateral settings and with relevant non-state actors. The survey investigated also the perception of the EU Commission’s senior servants in the delegations abroad and of non-European diplomats posted in Brussels, so to have a further look at, respectively, the EU’s self-representation in case of direct exposure to an external environment, and external representation of the EU among those more daily in contact with its institutions. In the country reports, attention was focused on four target groups: political elites, public opinion, the press and organised civic society. Due to the pioneer character of the study and the very limited resources available, it aimed initially to be a report on what could be grasped of the EU’s external images from existent sources with the additional analysis of the press and the use of interviews. The sources of the country reports were the existent academic literature on the topic (at the time very limited), the open sources available (regional and local opinion polls, official documents, websites of the relevant domestic constituencies), and the domestic press (popular newspapers usually distinguished along the left-right continuum or the pro-government/pro-opposition classification). The sources of the transversal reports included direct interviews, questionnaires, open sources (websites, official documents). Due to the different accessibility of data among countries, each researcher had to adapt the analysis of the specific needs of the country although safeguarding a certain degree of comparability of results. This limited the construction of data-bases but had the advantage of gaining more in-depth country-targeted case studies.

As we have seen, contrary to the NCRE’s programme, the Garnet/Forum programme included studies on the perception of the EU in international/multilateral settings. Each of these case-studies relied on official documents, declarations on the side of the participants and direct semi-structured long interviews. In particular, Ole Elgström’s analysis of European Partnership Agreement (EPA) negotiations was based on official declarations, newspaper articles, statements by non-governmental organisations, seven semi-structured interviews with ACP ambassadors/ministers in Brussels, as well as with two other ACP representatives (Elgström, 2010). Eugenia Baroncelli’s work on images at the World Bank looked at official and non-official documents, official statements by the Bank’s representatives, two questionnaires targeted at the executive directors and vice-presidents, interviews to technical and political staff (about half of the overall number of the Bank’s top political and technical management – Baroncelli, 2010: 162). Franziska Brantner’s work on images at the UN General Assembly used UN Secretariat press releases, UN reports and documents on economic and social development, worldwide, including Europe, session summaries of government statements at the UNGA, and 52 interviews with high-level diplomats and officials at the UNGA (Brantner, 2010). Daniela Sicurelli (2010a) based her analysis of images of the EU at the African Union using official documents, speeches and nine interviews with AU representatives, sub-regional officials and member state diplomats.
The focus of these studies has been on perceptions of the EU particularly in the specific field of competence of the organisation (or main areas of negotiation in the case of EPAs). Of relevance for the analysis of the multilateral stance of the EU the Garnet/Forum group has produced also a study on perceptions of the EU by non state actors (trade unions, social movements and NGOs) and activists present at the meetings of the European Social Forum (Andretta and Doerr, 2007).

At the same time that the Asia-Pacific project started, Ole Elgström launched his own research programme on the analysis of perceptions of the EU in multilateral negotiations in a separate project New Roles for the EU in International Politics? In fact, Elgström’s is the only project with a specific focus on multilateral settings of several types (Elgström, 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2010; Kilian and Elgström, 2010). Relying on direct, semi-structured interviews with participants from non-European countries, Elgström collected information on perceptions of the EU in a set of multilateral negotiations. In his first work he compared external perceptions of the EU in negotiations through 35 interviews in three settings: at the United Nations Forum on Forestry’s fourth session in Geneva in May 2004, at the 13th Conference on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) held in Bangkok in October 2004 and the member state permanent representations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Geneva in May 2005 (Elgström, 2006; Chaban, Elgström, Holland, 2006; on the WTO only Elgström, 2007). Targets were selected based upon their importance in that particular negotiation. A second round of research was dedicated to the negotiations for the EPAs (Elgström, 2010). The aim was always to understand what roles and characteristics non-European negotiators attach to the EU. Elgström’s most recent works deal with images of leadership at the climate change negotiations at the 14th Conference of Parties (COP-14) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Poznań (Kilian and Elgström, 2010).

There has been a close cooperation among these three broad projects: contributions by NCRE’s researchers and Elgström were included in the Garnet/Forum project’s outputs (Chaban and Kauffman, 2007a, 2007b; Stats, 2007; Elgström, 2010), some of the Garnet/Forum’s researchers later cooperated with NCRE (Fioramonti, 2009; Fioramonti and Kimunguyi, 2011) and the NCRE team and Elgström have published joint articles (Chaban, Elgström, Holland, 2006; Sheahan, Chaban, Elgström, Holland, 2010).

Next to these projects, some further ad-hoc analyses of perceptions of the EU in specific countries have appeared, looking particularly at China (Geeraerts, 2007; Shambaugh et al., 2008; Liqun, 2008), and Russia (Secriri, 2010). These works focused attention primarily on the elites (with the exception of Liqun who included university students) and used primarily textual analysis of speeches of party and government officials (Geeraerts, 2007), analysis of publications by specialists in universities or in major research institutions (Geeraerts, 2007; Shambaugh et al., 2008; Liqun, 2008; Secriri, 2010), interviews (Secriri, 2010) and in Liqun’s case, a survey of university students.

Works on perception of the EU in multilateral settings – beyond those by Elgström and those in the Garnet/Forum project – include works on perceptions of the EU in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Gupta and van der Grijp, 2000; Kilian and Elgström, 2010; Karlsson et al., 2011) and in some African regional organisations (Sicurelli, 2010b). The works on the perception of the EU at climate negotiations aim at understanding primarily if the Union is recognised to be a leader (and if so, what type) in environmental negotiations. Gupta and van der Grijp’s work was based on 67 interviews held in 1997–98; Karlsson et al. based their analysis on a survey with open-ended questions distributed to a sample of 233 of the nearly 9,600 participants at the Poznań conference of December 2008; Kilian and Elgström’s analysis was based primarily on eleven interviews/questionnaires with non-EU representatives and four interviews with EU officials, all involved in the COP 14 in Poznan. The analysis undertaken by
Daniela Sicurelli (2010b) on African regional organisations’ view of European foreign policies was based on official documents and speeches of the AU, ACP and African regional economic communities; on interviews with representatives of the ACP secretariat and the AU permanent missions in Brussels and New York (2007–9), and on a survey of officials of African regions (COMESA, ESA, SADC, SACU, EAC and ECOWAS) participating in the EPA negotiations, undertaken by the African Trade Policy Centre.

Moreover, for the first time in 2008, the EU 7th Framework Programme included a call for research projects on the external image of the EU. Since then, two main projects have been financed: Disaggregating Chinese Perception of the EU and Implications for the EU’s China Policy (2009–11) and EuroBroadMap (2009–11). The former coordinated by Wang Zhengxu at the University of Nottingham, has produced an opinion poll, but the author of this chapter could get hold only of the synthesis of the results and the full report is not available online. EuroBroadMap, directed by Claude Grasland of the French Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) employed a *sui generis* approach which made large use of mental maps. The population surveyed were undergraduate students and migrants to Europe from Asia and Africa. The results of these projects are still preliminary at the moment of writing, but the final report should shed light on an interesting aspect of images of the EU, in looking at the future generations and possibly new European citizens of tomorrow.

Summing up the characteristics of the existent literature, we can say that in terms of target groups there is a generalised attention to the elites (sometimes including intellectual elites), some attention to the general public (sometimes even to specific publics such as students), and to non-governmental actors. In terms of method, some contributions privilege qualitative, in-depth analyses of a specific case (country, international organisation or negotiations setting), while others privilege the construction of a quantitative dataset that allows a comparison among countries. Few make an analysis of a target group transnationally. In terms of theoretical background, there is a specific effort at embedding this research in the role/identity theory in the work coordinated by Lucarelli and Elgström, and a looser reference to the overall relevance of images for the external role of the EU in most of the contributions. All in all, the field continues to be under-theorised.

In what follows I will briefly summarise the results of the overall research on EU’s images and then make some suggestions on how the current research agenda could be improved.

**What have we learned?**

A comprehensive picture of the substantive findings of research on EU’s images would be impossible in this framework, but some recurring elements can be identified.

In the first place, the analysis of perceptions of the EU among the large non-European public expectedly reveal that the knowledge of the EU in non-European countries is not very high. Country studies show that in emerging powers such as India and Brazil, most citizens are unaware of the existence or purpose of the EU, while in South Africa it is viewed as a rather ineffective actor by the few who have an opinion about it. In general, knowledge seems to be positively correlated to the level of education and the geographical/historical proximity to Europe (as in the case of colonial countries). Evidence of this is present also in the NCRE’s analysis of the Asia-Pacific area and in the EuroBroadMap’s survey among students. This observation on the limited knowledge connects to the limited media coverage of the EU out of Europe. Although it ranges from country to country, in general it tends not to be very high and is often particularly related to economic issues and having a domestic focus (information on the EU are brought to the attention of the public if they have a direct national interest). It is for this reason that the
EU tends to be more present in economic newspapers and magazines. The attention of the media is more on the EU in the world than on internal EU affairs, with the notable exception of important moments of the EU’s life, such as EU enlargement, the adoption of the Euro, debates over the Constitution, and at the moment of writing, its current economic crisis. One of the frequently mentioned reasons for the little visibility of the EU in the media can be grasped paraphrasing what Donatella della Ratta (2010: 204) has reported about Al Jazeera: ‘Arab viewers are used to dealing with strong individual political powers. They are not accustomed to “softer entities”, where the decision-making process has to go through multiple rounds of negotiations and complex systems of collegial decisions.’ The EU tends to be regarded as complicated, bureaucratic and eventually ‘boring’ for a broad public.

The images most frequently associated with the EU – mostly by elites and the media – are that of an economic giant, a multilateral actor, an area economic integration; only rarely that of a norm-promoter. The one on which there is definitely consensus (even among the wider public) is the EU as an economic giant. This image is present both in countries and international institutions as well as among different types of constituency. Reporting on the WTO, Elgström (2007b: 956) states that non-European participants ‘are unanimous in their description of the EU as a great power in trade [and characterise it as] a “key player”, as “crucial and pivotal” and as a “superpower”’. He reports the interviewees saying that nothing happens in the WTO if the EU and the US are not on board. At the WB, 78 per cent of the interviewees regarded the EU as an international power (Baroncelli, 2010: 153). The NCRE’s and the Garnet/Forum projects show in several publications that the one of economic giant is the first image associated to the EU in most non-European countries surveyed. Similar results have been obtained by individual country case-studies. What is interesting to analyse, however, is the extent to which to this image of economic weight is associated with an image of power: is the EU actually able to lead international politics? Here some interesting results point to a gap between capabilities and actual ability to transform them in a leadership role.

Such a gap between potential and actual leadership is perceived across the board both by elites and the general public. According to some world surveys, most citizens and opinion makers around the world do not consider that the EU will play a leading political role in future decades. The USA, China and some regional players (such as India and Brazil) are believed to be those ‘calling the shots’ in the future global governance. However among the elites the perception of the EU’s potential leadership is stronger. What is not strong is the conviction that those resources can be used to define an actual leadership. A gap between potential and actual leadership emerges particularly in the case studies on multilateral settings but applies also to country-case studies as far as images among the media and elites are concerned. In his analysis of perceptions of leadership at the CITES, UNFF and WTO, Elgström (2006) finds a common element in the fact that the other participants regard the EU as indeed a potential leader, that in fact does not lead. The obstacles are in the first two cases the internal division and in the latter the conflict among conflicting roles. An important finding of this work, contributing to a long-term debate in literature, is that the EU is perceived as one single actor in each setting despite the fact that the EU has exclusive or shared competences with the member states. ‘Institutional consistency’ is not reported to be a problem according to the other participants; they regard the EU as a unitary actor anyway. What is considered to be problematic is inconsistency among EU’s different external policies (common agricultural policy – CAP; environment; trade; human rights policy). Such inconsistency is regarded as a weakening element of credibility and therefore legitimacy and, in the latter resort, leadership. As remarked by Eugenia Baroncelli (2010: 159–60), in spite of being regarded as a ‘standard-bearer’ of socio-economic values and individual rights, ‘the EU appears to bear the responsibility for a less than development-friendly stance in its agricultural
policies, and, increasingly, in its trade policies. Analogously, at the AU, although ‘representatives depict the EU as a model for integration and a key partner for economic development’, they firmly criticise ‘the lack of coherence between EU trade and development policies’ and ‘the way in which the EU imposes its model of integration and its conditions for development aid’ (Sicurelli 2010a: 190).

The ability of the EU to ‘lead by model and example’ is further challenged by what is criticised to be a patronising negotiating style by external elites. Interesting in this respect is the analysis of the ACP countries in the EPA negotiations. The analysis of the negotiations and the position of, respectively, the EU and the ACP countries therein, reveal marked dissonance not only between the EU’s approach and the ACP’s preference but also between the former’s self-representation (a constructor of development via liberalisation) and the latter’s perception of the intentions of the EU (a self-interested actor). ACP delegate are reported to consider ‘Commission negotiators [ … ] as patronizing and showing little understanding and sympathy towards ACP needs.’ Moreover, the EU’s use of warnings (by many ACP representatives seen as threats) and deadlines to put pressure on ACP countries was regarded as being the opposite of the behaviour of ‘partner’. In reality it was perceived at least as a ‘benign master’: ‘a great power, certainly friendly, but certain of the correctness of its own policy prescriptions and not really listening to the concerns of developing countries’ (Sheahan et al., 2010: 348). Criticism of the EU’s patronising method are very frequent both within countries and in multilateral settings.

A gap between leadership potential and effective behaviour is frequent also in the political realm, particularly as far as conflict resolution is concerned. For instance, the EU’s internal division and its inability to take an independent role with respect to the US are frequently considered to be the reason for the failure of the Union to play a leading role in the Middle East Peace process. According to Simona Santoro and Rami Nastallah (2010), not only do Palestinian elites view the EU’s internal policy-making as hampering the effectiveness of its foreign policy, but they also believe that in the past few years the Union has endorsed a ‘subordinate position’ vis-à-vis the US as far as the Middle East peace process is concerned. Along the same lines, in Iran, political elites and civil society see the EU as ‘as passively receiving and accepting negative biases on Iran from other foreign policy actors’, especially the US (Santini, Mauriello and Trombetta, 2010).

A high degree of influence – which however does not necessarily transform into leadership – is recognised by participants to apply to the EU in climate change negotiations (Kilian and Elgstrom, 2010; Karlson et al., 2011). However making a comparison with other potential leaders, Karlson et al. (2011) evidenced that the EU is regarded as a leader among others, not the only one: 62 per cent of all respondents identified the EU as having a leading role in the climate change negotiations; almost half respondents recognised China as a leader, and a quarter regarded the G77 and the US as leaders. However, the percentages change if we consider only the responses of those directly involved in the negotiations, in this case more people see China as a leader.

Besides its economic might, the EU is also perceived as a ‘model of regional integration’ and a ‘promoter of democracy’. The Union is widely recognised as the most successful example of regional integration in the contemporary world. Neither of the two images, however, come without criticism, particularly among elites. Although, there is a general recognition and appreciation of the EU as a model of regional integration, there are also criticism, particularly in the global South, for an Eurocentric view of regional integration and attempts by the EU to interfere with African ownership of the process of integration (Sicurelli, 2010b). The EPAs are explicitly mentioned as a case in point since they are aimed at dividing Africa into sub-regional groupings, which are ‘at odds with its parallel promotion of pan-African integration’ and reveal ‘the traditional “divide-and-rule” approach adopted by European countries during the colonial era’
As for democracy promotion, the EU approach, characterised by a mix of soft power, incentives and political dialogue, is often contrasted with the aggressive way of ‘exporting democracy’ adopted by the US (as in the case of development promotion – see Baroncelli, 2010). However, EU’s policy in this area as well as in the sphere of human rights, is criticised particularly for its double standards. For instance the image of the EU as a democracy and human rights promoter in the Middle East is weakened (among the elites, media and the larger public) by the observation of the EU’s soft response to Israel’s violations of human rights as well as the EU’s failure to recognise Hizbullah as an interlocutor in Lebanon. Frequently there is a criticism of the political conditionality attached to development aid and trade arrangements. Conditions on democratic reforms and good governance are criticised for being inspired by Eurocentric values. At the same time, the EU is accused of being eager to punish weaker countries in sub-Saharan Africa, where its economic leverage is higher, while glossing over abuse in powerful countries such as China or in the Middle East. In addition to that, the EU is also stigmatised for its internal democratic deficit, particularly underlined by elites with a closer contact with EU institutions (Carta, 2010). In some cases the EU’s democracy dialogue is criticised for its patronising mode. Analysing the media representation of the EU in the Fiji (where the EU has established a dialogue on democracy), Chaban and Holland (2011) notice a discrepancy between the EU’s self-representation and the Fijian local perspective that describes the EU as an ‘omnipresent and remote power, watching, guiding and caring (if you obey), but, at the same time teaching, punishing, and even threatening’ (p. 297). All in all, particularly in countries with a colonial past, the EU’s patronising style, coupled with its use of protectionist barriers contribute to reinforcing the perception of the EU as a neo-colonial power.

An interesting observation regarding the EU’s role as a distinctive actor (multilateral, norm-promoter, etc.) has been made by some authors: the fact that the EU is at times recognised to be a promoter of norms (democracy and human rights in primis) does not necessarily imply that it is regarded as a force for the good. Portela’s analysis of the elites’ perspective in Southeast Asia show that the EU is perceived as advancing norms, particularly human rights, development and environmental standards. However this is largely regarded as a result of it being an economic rather than a political power. Moreover elites are divided as to the evaluation of this nature of the EU, with part of them inclined to regard it as an encroachment in their domestic affaires (Portela, 2010).

While there have been criticisms of the EU’s policy consistency and the gap between self-perception and external perception, on one issue there seems to be consensus. Civil society organisations and political elites outside of Europe recognise that the EU has been at the forefront of important global campaigns, from the fight against climate change to the adoption of international agreements based on the rule of law: in other words, the EU is perceived as a beacon of multilateralism in global affairs. However, such multilateral character is interpreted quite differently in the various countries. For instance, the public discourse of Chinese political elites suggests a very different understanding of what multilateralism means, at odds with the EU’s preference for an international system able to move beyond national sovereignty. On the contrary, Chinese elites use multilateralism to define what would be better described as a multipolar world, characterised by the leadership of a few powers and firmly anchored on the prerogatives of national sovereignty. Quite similar are the views of governmental elites in India and Russia, who emphasise the importance of national sovereignty in global governance to demonstrate the legitimacy of their security concerns and justify their policies towards neighbouring countries. Hence, while there is consensus that the EU is a beacon of multilateralism, there does not seem to be consensus as to the definition of effective multilateralism.
Where to go now?

The body of literature on the external image of the EU is a laudable attempt to complement the existent literature on the EU’s international role and abandon what has been an excessively Eurocentric perspective on the topic. The brief summary above has provided a nuanced picture of the EU. Although the EU is regarded as an economic giant with high potential for leadership, it is not necessarily regarded as a leader, neither in bilateral nor in multilateral negotiations. When it is regarded as a leader, in the case of negotiations with less developed countries, its rhetoric of partnership is dismissed as based on false grounds. Surprisingly, although criticised for being internally fragmented and for this reason frequently ineffective, in some crucial multilateral negotiations it is regarded as a unitary actor. But how are these images formed? What is the interactive dynamic that produces them and with which effect on the EU, its policies and its citizens? In order to develop the research programme further so to respond to these questions, further steps should be taken.

In the first place, scholars need to better connect the theoretical foundations and the empirical research in studies on the external images of the EU. Its inspirational theoretical setting (explicit or implicit) is role theory and the idea there embedded that the way in which an actor defines and implements its international role, as well as the outcome of that role performance, has to do both with his own identity and the perceptions that relevant Others have of him/her. The way in which these different dimensions relate to each other is theoretically sketched but empirically not fully investigated: each aspect is the object of study of a separate branch of literature and the result is an archipelago of islands that have loose connections among themselves. It is now time for a research design that explores the interactive dynamic between processes of identity formation, role conceptualisation and external images.

Such a widened research agenda should also include a closer attention to a dimension which is mentioned in the literature but not explored therein: the interactive character of perceptions. To correct this deficiency it must be noted that this reflects a gap in the wider constructivist research agenda: the social dimension of self and others’ perceptions is theorised but there is no consolidated methodology to track down the mutually-constructed elements of the process. Perhaps in this respect it would be useful to focus research on paths of interaction and mutual perceptions so to track down mutual influence. The analysis of perceptions at negotiations seems to be the most promising in this respect, as efforts already made to track the interactive dynamics have proved to be interesting (Elgström, 2010; Sheahan et al., 2010). Interesting also the adoption of a longer-term, historical perspective so to track down possible shifts in perceptions.

Research would also benefit from a comparative perspective: how is the EU perceived with respect to other international actors such as China, India, the US? Are they seen as leaders/great powers/influential in various regions or in diverse multilateral settings, and in what ways? This comparative focus has just been introduced in the current research agenda of Ole Elgström and Natalia Chaban on climate change, but no full publications have appeared so far.

The relation between images of the EU and images of Europe and the extent to which historically-shaped images of one specific European country or Europe influence current images of the EU, should be better explored. The greatest methodological difficulty is to design research as to capture the relationship between images of Europe (frequently historically shaped) and of the EU, without simply conflating them. In a sense, this would be an inversion of the concept of Europeanisation: rather than looking at how European states become more EU-opean, one would look at how the EU is decodiﬁed according to historical relations with (speciﬁc) European states.

The above would provide one element among several to attempt at explaining images. To be sure, the existent literature already makes an attempt to identify the factors that influence
perceptions by embedding the images presented in the specific relations between the EU and that specific country, organisation, etc. However, the issue has not been theorised in such a way that a relation between different factors could be identified. In this respect a closer cooperation between political science, communication studies, post-colonial studies, and cultural studies could be profitable.

Such a close cooperation would be useful also to cope with a huge methodological problem that has to do with comparing perceptions developed in different cultural contexts. This poses severe limits to the standardisation of tools and particularly of questionnaires whose result is deeply affected by cultural filters. This points to the further general problem of the selection of target groups (e.g. who in multilateral settings? which elites? which NGOs) and of appropriate research strategies targeted to the case under investigation. As the analysis of perceptions of the EU in the climate change negotiations show, the result of the investigation might be very different depending on whose perceptions are investigated. Moreover, also the tools used need to be adapted to the specific multilateral setting. Widely distributed questionnaires might work better in the case of wide and diversified settings such as the conferences of the UNFCCC, while more targeted, semi-structured interviews might prove to be a better research strategy in the case of negotiations with a smaller number of participants.

A further element that could be added is the analysis of what the EU/Europe appears by looking at the wider public debate that develops through non-specialised literature, movies, talk shows (being media analysis mainly focused on primetime TV news – with the exception of Della Ratta, 2010). In this respect, it would be interesting to broaden the analysis of the media to TV debates, movies and books. This opens a completely new perspective on perceptions, less directly relevant as far as perceptions of the EU in multilateral settings are concerned, but interesting in itself and as background information on the cultural context in which the current and future elites participating in the multilateral negotiations socialise in the first place.

Despite the difficulty of doing research in this area, the analysis of perceptions of the EU in multilateral fora is definitely worth pursuing further. In the first place because images of the EU in multilateral settings have a direct policy relevance as they impact on the negotiations and on the final result of the EU’s foreign policy. In the second place, because it is in such specialised constituencies that images of legitimacy and effectiveness develop and then leak into the media reports and finally in the wider public debate. Precisely for these reasons, the analysis of perceptions of the EU should become an intrinsic component of the analysis of the EU in international institutions.

Notes

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2 The website of the Programme (www.euperceptions.canterbury.ac.nz/) provides a detailed description of the various projects in the Programme and its publications – amongst which particular attention should be given to: Holland, Chaban et al., 2005; Chaban, Holland and Ryan, 2009; Chaban and Holland, 2008, 2011; Holland and Chaban, 2010; Chaban, Smith and Holland, 2010; Brovelli, Chaban, Lai, Holland, 2010.

3 The focus was on South Africa, Kenya, Thailand, Vietnam, Fiji, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, the Cook Islands, Palau and Papua New Guinea.

4 Japan, South Korea, Mainland China, China’s special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines.

5 Japan, South Korea, China, India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand and Russia.

6 A brief summary of the project with a list of publications is available at: www.onlineforum.it/onlineforum-ricerche.asp. The full reports are available online: Lucarelli, 2007a; Lucarelli and Fioramonti,
2009a. Among the most relevant publications: Lucarelli, 2007b; Lucarelli and Fioramonti, 2010 and a series of articles and book chapters (e.g. Fioramonti and Poletti, 2008; Lucarelli and Fioramonti, 2009b; Fioramonti and Lucarelli, 2008; Carta and Mayer, 2008).

7 Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Egypt, Japan, India, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Mexico, Russia, Palestine, South Africa, United States and Venezuela.

8 The start up of the study was supported by Garnet and by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but the amount of resources available was very limited.


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International perceptions of the EU


