**Capturing the EU International Performance: an Analytical Framework**

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**From *Presence* to *Actorness* to *Performance*: A Conceptual Sojourn**

The discussion over the international dimension of the EU was long held captive to the overarching ontological question about the ‘nature of the beast’, creating a tense academic debate about whether the EU could and should be analyzed along the lines of traditional approaches to International Relations (IR). In parallel to the inconclusive academic debate, intra-EU policy advances and institutional developments in the European integration process have always had important externalities, forcing interactions of the EC/EU structures with the outer world. They shape the perceptions and expectations of other international actors, thus clearly indicating some form of international *presence* for the EU (Allen and Smith 1990). However, presence does not necessarily connote purposive external action, but may derive as an unintended consequence of domestic policy-making processes, like the creation of the Single Market or the Economic and Monetary Union.

The concept of *actorness* has taken the debate a step forward in the sense that it assumes deliberative and active functioning in international politics (Jupille and Caporaso 1998; Sjöstedt 1977; Cosgrove and Twitchett 1970). In other words, actorness relates to the capacity to act, whereas presence simply indicates a function of being rather than acting. It entails a degree of independence from the external environment, i.e. no full subjection to another actor, but also a degree of autonomy from the internal constituents, thus indicating a political entity capable of formulating purposes, reaching decisions, and engaging in purposive action (Bretherton and Vogler 2006). Thus, internal and external delimitation is crucial in the understanding of the concept. The second important point is that it is a relational concept, in the sense that its attribution to any political unit is an intersubjective process not only based on own perceptions but also requiring the recognition of the other units involved in any political process. In the EU context, it does not suffice for the EU to claim international actorness, it also needs to be recognized by states, non-state actors, and international organizations as an actor in the world stage.

There are different sets of criteria in the literature used to assess actorness. Cosgrove and Twitchett (1970) identify three mutually interdependent tests of actorness: the degree of autonomous decision-making power, continuing functions with an impact on inter-state relations, and an acknowledgement of the importance of the would-be actor by its members and other international actors. Jupille and Caporaso (1998) ascertain actorness on the basis of four criteria: recognition, authority, cohesion, and autonomy. The first criterion refers to the acceptance of the actor in question by other actors as a legitimate interlocutor; the second one to the would-be actor’s legal competence to act in a specific field; the third to its capacity to articulate consistent policy preferences; and the fourth, to institutional distinctiveness, i.e. capacity to function independently from its constituent members. Groen and Niemann (2011) use a variation of these criteria, focusing for reasons of parsimony only on cohesion and autonomy, arguing that the other two are redundant. Bretherton and Vogler (2006) propose five basic requirements for actorness: shared commitment to a set of overarching values and principles, the identification of policy priorities and the formulation of coherent policies, the ability to negotiate effectively with other actors in the international system, the availability of appropriate policy instruments, and the domestic legitimation of decision-making in the relevant fields with an external dimension.

The latter set is the only one that explicitly associates actorness with effective bargaining, considering it one of the prerequisites for actor capacity. However, this criterion is problematic, simply because a political unit in lack of bargaining capacity may still be an international actor albeit an ineffective one. More specifically for the EU, limited bargaining capacity may undermine the EU outreach and impact in international interactions (cf. Jørgensen 2009: 203-207), but does not nullify the actorness potential of the EU altogether. However, purposive actors do engage in international interactions in pursuit of own goals and objectives and effectiveness is attained on the basis of achieving these objectives. Setting aside very few cases of power asymmetries of such magnitude that bring about unilateral actions by some actors to meet their objectives, all external activities of an actor entail negotiations, in which bargaining capacity and power are crucial for the accomplishment of the identified goals.

The third generation of research on the EU international dimension moves beyond presence and actorness, taking up issues of effectiveness and *performance*. In general, performance of international organizations (IOs) has emerged as a key concern in light of widespread criticism towards IOs that they are undemocratic and lack legitimacy (Zweifel 2006). In that respect, good performance may justify the existence of an –otherwise unaccountable- IO, under the assumption that as long as an IO delivers on the allocated tasks and functions, issues of democratic governance may be downplayed and marginalized. In the EU context, this discussion resembles a lot the ‘permissive consensus’ thesis that featured strongly in the early stages of European integration (Lindberg and Scheingold, 1970: 40-41). At that time, public political apathy towards the EU institutions and political structures was not a concern, very much as a result of the widespread perception of prosperity associated with the integration process. The more questionable the prosperity-enhancing dimension of the EU became over time, the more critical voices were heard on the EU ‘democratic deficit’ and its paraphernalia (Hooghe and Marks 2008). This is especially true for the international interactions of the EU that encroach on the core of national sovereignty constraining national foreign affairs policies. Thus, understanding and assessing the EU international performance is crucial for further integration in this field.

***Three Levels of Performance Analysis: Output, Outcome, and Impact***

In contrast to effectiveness, which is associated with an organization’s ability to achieve certain outcomes, the concept of performance is not only about the achievement of agreed-upon objectives. It goes deeper by taking into consideration the underlying, intra-organizational, agreement-reaching processes. It assesses implicitly the content of these objectives and addresses issues of how they are defined. In that respect, an organization may well meet the agreed objectives –i.e. be effective - even when its overall performance is not very impressive. This may be an indication of low organizational standards of success, lack of ambition, or simply awareness of internal and external constraints that impede the organization from delivering on the objectives. By the same token, a positive performance in terms of activation and engagement may not be judged effective because the original goals are very ambitious and difficult to achieve in the first place or are incongruent with the scarce organizational resources and its capacity to meet them (Gutner and Thompson 2010: 231-2). At the EU context, this point invokes the well-spotted ‘capabilities-expectations gap’ that dominated a large part of the academic and policymaking analysis of the Common Foreign and Security Policy failures in the 1990s (Hill 1998, 1993). The implication is that effectiveness is only one possible indicator -among others- that can be used to evaluate the performance of an IO and that relying on effectiveness exclusively may be misleading regarding the international performance of the EU (Jørgensen and Oberthür, 2011).

A second point to be made is that the performance of IOs in general is extremely prone to the “eye of the beholder” problem, in the sense that the assessment depends a lot on the evaluator (Gutner and Thompson 2010: 233-4). Different stakeholders (i.e. members of the IO) may have different preferences and different perceptions of what the IO is about and what it should do in the world. Given that the IOs usually serve multiple functions and have broad mandates that do not offer specific evaluation criteria, the constituent principals differ in what they consider success and failure. It might even be the case that a poorly-performing IO is desirable for some stakeholders, especially those that are dragged in a contractual agreement for setting up an IO by fear of exclusion without fully abiding to its rationale or guiding principles (Lipson 2010). The same differentiation vis-à-vis performance holds for members and non-members of an IO, be that states, NGOs or other international actors. This is again due to different perceptions (check, for example, the contradicting views of states and NGOs on the performance of the World Bank in tackling world poverty) or simply due to the awareness of the ‘insiders’ of the difficulties to overcome recalcitrant members and improve the IO performance. Both dimensions are relevant in the case of the EU: the heterogeneity of stakeholders (i.e. member-states) guarantees internal differentiation in the evaluation of its goal attainment and international performance. At the same time, widespread criticism may be voiced about the EU’s engagement in international affairs from outside the policymaking community that ignores the inherent difficulties of a multilateral order like the EU to intersect with other such orders, most notably the UN (Laatikainen and Smith 2006: 19-22).

The two points mentioned above suggest that the international performance of the EU, which constitutes in a positivist language the ‘dependent variable’ of our research, needs to be clarified as to what exactly we are trying to analyze and evaluate. This may sound a trivial question but it is not. It brings in the foreground two important issues: *focus* and *level of analysis* (Underdal 2002: 5-7). By focus, we refer to whether our object of analysis and evaluation is the external dimension of the EU *per se* or whether we are taking into consideration before the final verdict any positive or negative side effects that may derive from the international activities of the EU. Even if performance may be found lagging behind expectations with occasionally impressive failures, international as well as intra-EU negotiations are more often than not continuous and/or repetitive games rather than one-off ones. This suggests a gradual buildup of learning and socialization processes that may have a more important and far reaching impact than any formal outcome of an EU initiative. Process-generated costs and benefits that derive from international engagement have a longer time horizon and are more difficult to capture, let alone be integrated in any performance analysis of a short- to medium-term nature.

In terms of the level of analysis, we can identify three different performance perspectives, looking at the ***output*, *outcome***, and ***impact*** of the EU international activities (see Table 1). Analytically, they constitute three distinctive steps in a causal chain of events (Underdal 2002: 6). At micro-level, the ***output*** perspective is related basically with the intra-EU process of policy-formation, focusing on the deliverables of internal political and institutional dynamics that inform the EU international engagement. This output could be a formal comprehensive policy document outlining the EU positions in a field or in international affairs more broadly, like for example the European Security Strategy. Or it could be very narrow-focused, like a statement or a Council decision on an intended course of action in a regional crisis. It could also take a more abstract form in the sense of outlining general norms, principles and rules of action. In any case, it constitutes the starting point of the outcome and impact analysis and offers a benchmark for their assessment (Underdal 2002: 6).

To play this benchmarking role, we first need to examine whether the internal policymaking process is effective, in other words whether there is a collective output to start with. Obviously, this is a *sine qua non* condition, in the sense that without an output it is very difficult to make a case about performance at all. Once there is an output, performance indicators comprise clarity, meaningfulness, relevance to the stakeholders, and inclusiveness. In general, all four indicators have a positive relationship with output performance and increase performance perspectives also vis-à-vis the outcome and impact ones. The common intervening variable through which this positive relationship materializes is the underlying and implicit policy convergence among EU member-states that paves the way for cohesive action and in that respect increases the outcome and impact potential of EU international activities. Output clarity suggests that EU member-states have a clear view on what needs to or can be done and how to do it. Meaningfulness and relevance reflect the degree of EU responsiveness to the issue in question. Meaningful outputs entail an EU response fine-tuned with the actual problem (consider, for example, how meaningful is an EU decision to send special envoys in a fact finding mission or to monitor the escalation of a regional crisis when ethnic cleansing is in process). Both for the clarity and meaningfulness indicators, an output can be deliberately blunt or hazy just for the EU to save face and mask the underlying differences among member-states. Relevant to the EU member-states outputs curtail member-states’ autonomous action when they think the EU fails to respond appropriately to an international development. Finally, inclusiveness is linked with relevance and ensures the synthesis of divergent views rather than the marginalization and alienation of stake-holders.

At meso-level, the ***outcome*** perspective shifts attention to the implementation of the output and the deriving behavioral adjustment of the EU. It refers to the EU international activation along the output lines and captures how the EU takes this output to the international level. It may take the form of active international engagement (diplomatic, economic, military) in pursuit of a given objective, like the handling of a regional security crisis or the combatting of an identified security threat, like the proliferation of arms of mass destruction. Additionally, it may comprise initiatives of creating new or adjusting existing international policy orders, in congruence with the EU norms, principles and interests, by contributing to the building up or reforming of international organizations (cf. Young 1999). These outcomes do not necessarily lead to problem solving: neither the EU engagement suggests that a crisis will be solved nor that the EU efforts will bring about a new international policy order or deliver a more functional international organization. The emphasis of the outcome perspective is on the EU efforts and actions and whether they carry out the agreed outputs and *not* on their impact.

At this level, we can identify three performance indicators, namely cohesion and continuity, proper use of available instruments, and supply of international leadership. The first two link the outcome with the output perspective, examining to what extent there is an EU behavioral change as a result of the agreed output. Cohesion may have been more relevant in the pre-Lisbon era, when different EU institutional actors were responsible for various aspects of the EU international engagement, as a result of which polyphony often turned to cacophony. Consider, for example, the case of economic sanctions imposed as a result of a Council decision to a regime for violation of human rights while at the same time the country in question continued to receive developmental aid from relevant EU programs handled by the Commission. The last two mostly refer to how the EU seeks to realize the output, whether it makes full use of the available resources and instruments and adopts a leadership profile. Both are indications of decisiveness and reveal the EU intention to become a more substantive international actor. Needless to say, there is again a positive correlation between these indicators and outcome performance.

Finally, at macro-level, the ***impact*** perspective assesses performance on the basis of the effect of the EU international outcomes, that is the result of EU activities either in handling individual crises or in the broader process of policy order formation. Methodologically speaking, the challenge in this perspective is to establish causality between the EU actions and the changed environment in order to credit the EU with developments and establish solidly any claims about the EU performance record. The underlying counterfactual question that we should bear in mind and seek to address is what would have happened if the EU had not intervened.

There are three types of standards that have been proposed to assess the impact dimension of IOs performance: goal attainment, problem solving and collective optima (Mitchell 2008: 87-90). Goal attainment entails an assessment on the basis of the formal organizational goals identified in the output. Presumably, as mentioned above in the output criteria of clarity and meaningfulness, the output is often unambitious or hazy, which enables an international organization and/or its stakeholders to claim success and good performance in any case. Often, to avoid reputational costs of ‘bad performance’, goals are intentionally low-level and thus easily achieved. A problem-solving approach is a more ambitious standard of impact performance that associates performance with the progress toward resolving an issue as defined by the originators and stakeholders of an organization. In the EU parlance, member-states may well know what they want to achieve but acknowledging the difficulties, they produce a far less ambitious output that constitutes their formal performance benchmark. Finally, the collective optima standard is even more ambitious than the former two, raising further the threshold of ‘good performance’ by selecting a more holistic approach to what constitutes the solution to a problem. For example, for the EU, brokering a ceasefire in a regional imbroglio may be an indication of successful intervention but this does not produce a comprehensive solution to the crisis. Or, orchestrating the international response to the Iranian nuclear program may have well gained some praise for the EU but has not settled the issue.

Regardless of the chosen standard of assessment, effectiveness and efficiency are the two main indicators to evaluate the impact perspective of the EU international performance. Effectiveness captures primarily the degree of goal attainment for the EU, whoever defines the goal and whatever its content might be (Groen and Niemann 2011: 7). Efficiency captures the ratio of used resources to their actual impact, implying that given the scarcity of EU resources, their marginal utility should be also taken into consideration when evaluating the impact performance of the EU (Jørgensen and Oberthür, 2011).

***Parameters Conditioning the EU International Performance***

Different parameters condition each level of analysis of the EU international performance. Starting from the output perspective, endogenous factors primarily cast their effect, most importantly the heterogeneity of member-states and their preferences as well as the institutional *modus operandi* of the EU. The EU’s political system is especially complex and dynamic, with multiple focal points of power at national and EU level (Hix 2005). The EU suffers inherently from a split personality syndrome, constituting both an actor in its own right but also a multilateral arena for the articulation and projection of member-states’ particularistic interests (Jørgensen and Laatikainen 2006: 10). Thus, unsurprisingly, the EU international performance is subject to the degree of preference heterogeneity among the EU member-states in the first place and whether the aggregation function operates smoothly. Considerable congruence of the constituent principals in the first place -or goal cohesion in the language of Jupille and Caporaso (1998)- clearly adds to the EU international performance, allowing a clear, meaningful, and inclusive output that testifies to the EU relevance for the primary stakeholders. Internal ruptures that prove impossible to bridge create either inaction or at best rather obscure outputs that undermine the EU performance perspective.

The second important parameter that affects the output perspective is the EU institutional *modus operandi*. The degree of fragmentation and the set of rules that defines the policymaking mode among and within executive poles have a strong effect on the capacity of an actor to adopt and support negotiating positions that depart from the *status quo* (Tsebelis 1995). Thus, the fragmented EU policymaking system and the constraining decision-making rules in most thematic areas that touch upon the EU international dimension make life hard for EU policymakers to reach an agreement. Furthermore, once an output emerges as the end product of a protracted and painful internal process, it is often locked in, curtailing the EU negotiating flexibility and subsequently affecting negatively performance. The EU negotiator has to bear in mind constantly this bottleneck to avoid possible ratification failures. This comes at the cost of bargaining effectiveness, missing important opportunities to broker an international agreement (Meunier 2000: 111-2; Meunier and Nicolaidis 1999).

As regards the outcome perspective, we can identify two sets of parameters, namely resources and the legal and institutional provisions that delimit the EU international activity. The first set comprises the available EU arsenal in terms of diplomatic, economic and military means of engagement in international affairs. The second set refers to the EU international mandate, i.e. what the EU can do and what remains still in the hands of member-states. It also refers to the institutional and legal arrangements that have been agreed upon in order to realize this mandate, like for example the legal personality of EU, the institutional novelty of the High Representative and the European External Action Service. Again, there is a positive association between these parameters and the outcome performance of the EU, in the sense that the more available resources there are, the broader the EU mandate, and the more functional the arrangements are, the better the EU should be expected to perform.

Finally, at the impact level of performance, we need to consider two interrelated parameters, first, the bargaining power of the EU and second, the role of other international actors, like states, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. These two parameters merge when we realize that the bargaining power is a relational concept and that it takes two to tango (Blavoukos and Bourantonis 2011). In that sense, the outcome of multilateral negotiations and subsequently the impact performance of the EU are not solely dependent on the EU inputs in the bargaining process; multilateral negotiations are inherently complex processes with their own characteristics and dynamics. Thus, any account of the EU intervention should be heavily contextualized, looking at the structure and content of the specific multilateral negotiations under examination. The negotiation structure refers to the number and attributes of the negotiating partners, revealing patterns of power asymmetries and influence, as well as the stages and sequencing of the negotiations *per se* (Berridge 2005). The negotiation content captures mainly the nature of the bargaining agenda, the main issue there being whether the EU is a reformist *demandeur* or a conservative proponent of the *status quo* (Meunier 2000: 112-15).

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| TABLE 1: THREE LEVELS OF PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS |
| OUTPUT (micro-level) | **OUTCOME (meso-level)** | **IMPACT (macro-level)** |
| Process of policy formation (intra-EU) | EU international activation (behavioral change): how the EU takes the output at the international level | Result of the EU international activation:* Regime formation (set up and reform of IOs)
* Handling of individual crises
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| CRITERIA –INDICATORS |
| * Inclusiveness
* Meaningfulness
* Relevance to the EU stakeholders
* Clarity
 | * Cohesion-Continuity
* Use of Available Instruments
* Supply of International Leadership
 | * Effectiveness
* Efficiency
 |
| PARAMETERS |
| * Heterogeneity of M/S
* Institutional *modus operandi* (decision making rules, internal leadership)
 | * Available resources
* Institutional and legal provisions (mandate, legal personality, EEAS)
 | * Bargaining power
* Role of other international actors (states, IOs, NGOs)
 |