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# European Diplomatic Practice Seen through the post-Graduate Lens

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DEPARTMENT OF EU INTERNATIONAL  
RELATIONS AND DIPLOMACY STUDIES

EU Diplomacy Paper

07 / 2023



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## **EU Diplomacy Papers**

### **7/2023**

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Zane Šime

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## About the Author

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the socialisation among participants in an educational programme dedicated to the external action and diplomacy of the European Union (EU) to better grasp the preconceptions and first early career lessons learnt about European diplomatic practice. It explores to what extent young professionals determined to embark on a diplomatic career see the evolution of the EU's diplomatic culture and *esprit de corps* as dependent on the thematic points of convergence that unite aspiring diplomats. A focus group study of some students of the advanced Master's programme in EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies at the College of Europe reveals that convergence is in fact not considered salient. Instead, the study finds that they prioritise coherence as the most important aspect of EU diplomatic action across all governance levels and policy domains during every-day and crisis periods. They consider that the (future) standing of the EU in the world and especially in the diplomatic realm depends on the capacity of the EU's supranationally organised services and its EU Member States to work in a more concerted manner.

## Introduction

Going back to the historic plans of “a European University” cherished under the impulse of Jean Monnet (Cohen, 2023, 518), educational programmes launched by entities anchored in the national settings of several Member States of the European Union (EU) and European initiatives at various stages of European integration are testimonies of their time. The EU has a rich culture of educational and training initiatives, implemented on an *ad hoc* or more longitudinal basis, documented in various scholarly publications (Lloveras Soler, 2011; Mahncke & Gstöhl, 2012). With its deep roots in Europe, educational internationalism offers a broader contextualisation for this EU historical legacy (Droux, Hofstetter & Robert, 2020, 7).

This paper examines to what extent, and on which points, the socialisation within an educational programme leads students to adopt a common understanding of EU diplomacy. It tests the ‘straw-in-the-wind hypothesis’ whether the evolution of the EU diplomatic culture and *esprit de corps* depends on the thematic points of convergence that unite aspiring diplomats. In other words, through the prism of the socialisation of postgraduate students, it uncovers the organisationally grounded routines and institutionally learned and fostered perceptions of the ways how EU diplomacy is and should be exerted daily. *Esprit de corps* is understood as “the extent to which an individual enthusiastically shares the values and goals of an organization” (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015, 385).

Convergence refers to the propensity towards adopting increasing like-mindedness among EU Member States and EU institutions. The convergence of interests is key to projecting the EU as a truly unified actor. In comparison, coherence describes the constellation of interest articulation among EU Member States and EU institutions that would respect the diversity of stances and at the same time seek to present this ‘mosaic of positions and considerations’ to other interlocutors in an understandable manner. The coherence of the EU’s interest articulations aims to demonstrate to the rest of the world that the full diversity of stances is well-known and acknowledged by EU actors. The distinction between convergence and coherence is made to elaborate on the main argument of this paper that socialisation within an educational programme enables students to espouse a certain degree of shared understanding of EU diplomacy.

The College of Europe is one of the most eminent educational establishments dedicated to the study of the European integration process (Badel, 2021, 356;

Bekemans, Mahncke & Picht, 1999; Pasquinucci, 2020, 83). The EU International Relations and Diplomacy Studies programme of the College bridges the study and practice of EU policy and diplomacy by introducing students to EU external action and diplomacy studies, including through simulations and exposure to discussions about the achievements and failures of the EU's external action presented by scholars as well as practitioners.

This study focuses on the perspectives of around ten members of the College student society 'Young Diplomats', who come from different EU Member States and are interested in becoming diplomats themselves. These perspectives of an upcoming generation of professionals of European and international affairs is placed in the context of the latest scholarly thinking on European diplomacy. Anchored in practice theory, the study contributes to bridging the gap in the existing literature between the learning of diplomacy (for example, Doole et al., 2022, 2, 5) and actual performance sites of diplomacy (for example, Biscop 2021; Duić, 2021, 109; Gatti, 2021, 174). The postgraduate stage of the academic trajectory is an especially fruitful episode for such an enquiry into the learning-practice nexus because it is positioned at the cusp between the final stages of academic education and professional experience in EU diplomacy. Besides creating more tightly knit intersections between the literature on the EU studies and diplomacy practice, this paper aspires to contribute to the scholarly enquiry in the field of EU External Action Studies (Gstöhl & Schunz, 2023) about the development of a 'European' diplomatic practice (Duke, Pomorska & Vanhoonacker, 2012, 3, 7; González et al., 2022), as well as the existing literature on the perceptions of the EU's international standing (for example, Chaban & Elgström, 2021; Fioramonti & Lucarelli, 2010).

The paper's first part articulates this study's foundations in practice theory. The second part sets out some methodological considerations. The third part presents the main empirical findings combining the views expressed by the Young Diplomats with insights obtained by the author as a staff member of the same Studies Department. The fourth part outlines some points for discussions and further consideration. The concluding part sums up the key points and hints at promising ways forward for studying EU diplomacy.

### **Practice theory of post-Westphalian routines**

In this study, practice theory focusing on various strands of "Bourdieuism" (Walters, 2022, 122) lays the grounds to delve into the underexamined formative stages of the craft of contemporary diplomacy. Practice theory offers a conducive foundation for

bridging the somewhat artificial gap in the existing literature between education and diplomacy studies. Following the hypothesis, from the vast literature on European diplomacy and practice theory, this paper taps into the existing academic and grey literature on the EU diplomatic culture and *esprit de corps* to explore the true “feel for the game” of the diplomatic constellation (Outhwaite, 2022, 702). Furthermore, this theoretical choice is guided by the interest to contribute to a research strand that “remains a set of very young, elastic and dynamic theoretical approaches” to the study of international relations and the EU as a notable actor or an aggregate entity formed and represented by supranational and national international engagement (Drieschova, Bueger & Hopf, 2022, 8).

Practices are “patterned actions” (Adler & Faubert, 2022, 52). They are “embedded in organised contexts” and “socially developed through learning and training” (Adler, 2019, 19; Adler & Faubert, 2022, 52). To a considerable degree, practices rely on perceptions which capture the thought that guides the chosen routine action. Perceptions of actions and estimations of the best ways forward matter and can have substantial implications on the dynamics of international relations (Johnson & Tierney, 2019). Studying the assessments and preferences of young professionals can enlighten us about the preconceptions with which they are entering the labour market of international and European affairs. Socialisation is “the process through which an individual becomes a member of a wider community” (Jefferson, 2021, 33). Advanced learning programmes are excellent environments to explore diverse angles of socialisation processes (Makarychev & Butnaru Troncota, 2022, 213), including with regard to EU diplomacy.

Learning changes an individual's ability to “engage in practice”, deepening the awareness of why people engage in a specific practice and to what resources they have access in order to engage in the chosen practices (Adler & Faubert, 2022, 53). Thus, studying perceptions and assessments crafted by students of advanced learning centres becomes a fruitful task to identify how the educational sector influences the evolution and contemporary thinking on EU diplomacy.

The group of the College student society Young Diplomats is in this study treated as a community of practice or “learning community” which displays a specific configuration of selective retention of practices, meaning the selective approach performed collectively regarding the differential demise or perpetuation of practices “and background knowledge that sustains them” (Adler, 2019, 31, 113).

The reason why the exploration of young professionals' observations and assessment of EU diplomacy is such a telling episode of the perceived prevailing order of the day is based on Adler's reasoning that "[t]he more people practice the same practice and therefore share background knowledge, the more they reinforce the practice, thus keeping it preferentially selected compared with other practices" (Adler, 2019, 109). Through practice and routinised interactions, agents reiterate specific knowledge corresponding to their identity, thereby strengthening the continuous persistence of a social order irrespective of social and temporary dynamics (Adler, 2019, 191; Pouliot, 2022, 181). If collective understandings and minds are formed and nurtured by shared habits, customs, and practices (Adler & Faubert, 2022, 50), then studying these sequences of usual reasoning and actions in different periods can offer a glimpse into the evolving patterns of EU diplomacy. It is crucial for better understanding the socialisation processes.

A fascinating dimension of the study of the EU's diplomacy practice and mastery is the decades-long and persistent struggle (discussed among established scholars) over what is considered a 'genuine' EU diplomat. This intellectual preoccupation is noted in scholarly writings even many years after the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) (Dumouchel, 2022, 159). Such a continuous tension between tradition and novelty in diplomacy displays a propensity in certain academic and professional circles to cling to the earlier notions of diplomats as closed social circles of national representatives of foreign service (for example, as described by Keylor, 2015, 4; O'Reilly, 2017). And understandably so because

"[d]espite all the changes that have occurred in global affairs over the past centuries, diplomacy still trades in secrecy and seclusion while avoiding intrusions and other actions that could upset balances and the idea of equality in international relations. Contemporary diplomacy is built on ancient foundations, understandings, and practices." (Duquet, 2022, 158)

Thus, the overall debate around what entails a true and influential 'European diplomat' and how it corresponds or differs from the 'EU diplomat' is an ever-dynamic one, prone to diverse contextualisation depending on either a geographic, time-bound or case-specific context and worldviews (Badel, 2021, 335, 477; Jørgensen et al., 2022). This understanding of shared customs, beliefs, and values within the overall "model of coexisting rights in diplomacy" goes beyond 'Brusselisation' or characteristics of collaborative diplomatic routines revolving around Brussels-based decision-making and Brussels as a notional Bourdieusian 'field' (Duquet, 2022, 282;

Spence, 2005, 27). The field particularities of EU diplomacy practice is crucial to distinguish the unique traits of these routines from other international and regional bodies, such as the study of the United Nations' diplomacy and its approach to the ideal of the pursuit of peace (Sapiro, Leperlier & Brahim, 2018, 8; Troy, 2021, 907).

Consequently, the attempt to grasp the core practices of an *esprit de corps* and 'we-feeling', meaning the loyalty to the designated EU service, a collegial sense of togetherness and unity is an important but, at the same time, genuinely demanding and fluid endeavour (Duquet, 2022, 284; Juncos & Pomorska, 2023, 4, 14). The potential of a consolidated and united stance is a point of departure. However, its exact contours remain vague and prone to many variations. After all, the overall ideal captured by an *esprit de corps* should serve first and foremost as an inspiring ideal to uplift the hearts and minds of diplomatic circles across Europe and channel their actions in a more concerted manner. This convergence effect has already been spotted and should continue evolving irrespective of their career trajectories and past professional experiences, and acquired convictions documented in earlier scholarly studies (such as, for example, Juncos & Pomorska, 2014, 312-313).

The primary purpose of an *esprit de corps* is not to be a rigid standardisation pattern for staff qualification. In European Studies the term refers to the "conscience of 'intellectual debts'" (Cohen, 2023, 525). The earlier calls for "a home-made diplomatic culture", "a sentiment of belonging to a common house", "a European diplomatic brand" and "European diplomatic mindset" indicate that the *esprit de corps* must serve as an aspirational embodiment of 'the self' (Juncos & Pomorska, 2015, 389; Hocking, 2005, 8; Vimont, 2021, 16, 20, 23). Contrary to the legal assessment of a lack of leverage in international diplomatic affairs (Duquet, 2022, 230-231), this cultivated understanding of 'the self' instils a notion of an almost magical post-Westphalianism. "There was and still is a strong belief that the Union's place in the world is unique, a conviction that easily seeps into EU rhetoric" (ibid., 312). That certitude is captured in the "Europe-as-power" debates (Young & Ravinet, 2022), especially in such terms as the "normative superpower" denoting a new type of great power that is different from the historical predecessors in its institutional constellation and approach to external action (Larsson & Widen, 2022, 3).

Altogether, grasping which routines and what characteristics young professionals find worthy of being associated with competent EU diplomatic performance is very informative about *l'esprit de l'époque* or the generational mindset revolving around this fluid notion.

## Methodology

The case study of this paper examines the shared perspectives on EU diplomacy retained by the students of the Young Diplomats society after the socialisation process of the first semester, which provides them with a broad introduction to EU external action. Consequently, this study seeks to unpack the causal mechanism for the socialisation-driven adoption of a common understanding of EU diplomacy among aspiring diplomats (Maskey, 2022, 912). “A straw in the wind test suggests that the evidence provided is of low uniqueness and low certainty” (ibid., 915). It is a satisfactory choice for a hypothesis because the main interest is not to come to highly generalisable conclusions that would apply elsewhere. Instead, it offers proper grounds to pool a vaster array of empirical material and to study in greater depth how postgraduate learning at the College, and academic and professional lessons learnt prior to the College studies, shape present-day aspirations and assessments among the Young Diplomats about their envisaged professional setting. Overall, process tracing requires considerable “‘digging’ for evidence – both confirming and *disconfirming*” as parts of the hypothesised causal mechanism (Krueger & Wright, 2022, 127). The subsequent paragraphs explain in greater detail the unpacking of the studied mechanism and how diverse empirical material feeds into this process.

The practice approach recognises that the study of perceptions should not be conflated with the reasoning of the observed or interviewed individuals (Austin & Leander, 2022, 223). Thereby, a study is an analytical perspective, not an exact mirror of the studied community of practice. This understanding has a high degree of like-mindedness with the understanding that “focus groups are not simply a means of data collection but, rather, they are contextualized group communication events in which, like other group communication events, people assert their views and question, and learn and change” (Zorn et al., 2006, 136). The interactions influence individuals, and they leave the focus group deliberation with altered dispositions, thus generating multiple perspectives on the experienced encounter (Hennink, 2014, 181; Zorn et al., 2006, 136). What feeds into this paper is primarily the uninterrupted analytical process of the moderator and author of this paper. Two subsections of the paper clarify the chosen approach to convene the focus group and complete the thematic network analysis to trace the results of the socialisation process and unpack the studied mechanism.

### *Data collection: focus group*

To concisely note the diversity of empirical material that is woven into this paper, following the example of Phillips, Christensen-Strynø & Frølund (2022, 772-773) and Bourdieu-inspired reasoning (Ribeiro & Miraldi, 2022), the autoethnographic component and the role of the researcher's own field notes deserve to be mentioned as crucial components of the overall chosen mixed methods research design and enablers of personal reflexivity of the author of this paper (Hennink, 2014, 25, 117; Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2018, 7). Despite the critique that some consider insights from the field to be "inherently loose and impressionistic" (Dennis, 2022, 8), this is "the self in the field" or "the being-there-ness" component of this research (James, 2013, 564-565).<sup>1</sup>

The primary source of empirical data are anonymised transcripts of two meetings in a focus group setting with around ten Young Diplomats. Taking inspiration from the intellectual typologies featured in the study of the United States intellectual circles (Hanania & Abrahms, 2023, 11), the Young Diplomats participating in these two meetings are approached as aspiring and early-career foreign policy professionals with an apparent intent to translate their intellectual preferences honed throughout the previous academic, professional stages and the College learning process into policy-oriented action during the following chapters of their careers anticipated to relate to international and European affairs, that is, diplomacy in the broader sense of the term.

"As a research technique, focus groups collect data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" with the group dynamic being "part of the method and data" in the form of short stories or comments on what others have said (Rothwell, 2010, 176). Following the "non-directive interviewing" approach, the Young Diplomats were free to define their preferred mode to respond to the template of questions concerning professional experience, the current state of the European diplomatic practice and ideal European diplomacy practice - in other words, the "discussion guide" (Hennink, 2014, 48, 72). The opening part of the template concerned questions on the prior academic, professional, and training experiences relevant to the specialisation in EU diplomacy.

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<sup>1</sup> The way the author has chosen to contextualise the inputs from the Young Diplomats relies on the insights obtained through her professional experience as an Academic Assistant in their study programme.

Engaged in an active listening mode (Hennink, 2014, 74), the moderator seldomly encouraged to elaborate on some points raised by the Young Diplomats. Not to neglect the scholarly invitation to note the interactive patterns (Duggleby, 2005, 837), the dynamics that unfolded attest to the high collegiality and team spirit developed over the first jointly experienced semester at the College. Both conversations were organised at the beginning of the second semester of the year-long study programme.

Almost all focus group participants obtained a specialisation in European or EU studies before their arrival at the College. Several Young Diplomats also benefited from academic studies in countries outside of the EU, such as the United Kingdom, China, and the United States, that brought a broader contextualisation of their thinking on European diplomacy in the world. Prior experiences and acquired expertise are crucial for adequately tracing how the Young Diplomats exemplify their perspective of being 'united in diversity' and having some shared notions of European diplomatic practices despite the remarkably varied academic and professional backgrounds.

#### *Data analysis: exploratory-descriptive approach and thematic networks*

The most crucial factor contributing to the singularity of findings captured in this paper is based on the thematic analysis, which is inspired and combines some of the elements of the exploratory-descriptive research approach and thematic networks as the chosen transcript analysis methods. Exploratory-descriptive qualitative research aims to examine and "describe the experiences of participants in relation to phenomena under study" (Hunter, McCallum & Howes, 2018, 7). The exploratory dimension relates to identifying generalisations and along with those main statements capturing "the core of the experience" from participants (ibid.).

By contrast, thematic networks are "web-like illustrations (*networks*) that summarize the main *themes* constituting a piece of text" (Attride-Stirling, 2001, 386). Thematic analyses attempt to identify the salient themes and how those are positioned in a network constellation (ibid., 387). The inter-relational pattern is explored through the coding framework developed on the chosen theoretical and empirical basis (ibid., 390). The key fragments of the developed networked patterns are the Global Theme shouldered by several Organizing Themes. An Organizing Theme serves as the connector for clusters of Basic Themes (ibid., 392).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Due to some thematic ambiguity and overlaps, some coded sentences were acknowledged to correspond to two Basic Themes (not just one). However, to avoid too much ambiguity,

Correspondingly, in this study, both methodological sources of inspiration – an exploratory-descriptive research approach and thematic networks – facilitate the identification of the main findings about the role of education and prior academic and professional experiences in adopting a common understanding of EU diplomacy and *esprit de corps*. The exploratory-descriptive research goes beyond mere term-counting mechanics. Borrowing noteworthy acknowledgments from a contemplation of the quantitative and qualitative reasoning of content analysis, “a simple frequency count may not always indicate the nature of a particular psychological” and intellectual state, and conceptual dispositions “of the communicator unless the meaning of the content characteristic is deciphered in the overall context of the text” (Devi Prasad, 2019, 11). Therefore, the number of words indicated in the subsequent sections to argue for the proportional representation of one or another theme in the transcripts should be treated as an approximate number.

### **Thematic Network of European Diplomatic Practices**

The network analysis resulted in a distinctively uneven picture of theme representation. The Global Theme was coined based on the ‘common understanding of EU diplomacy’ research question. Contrary to the hypothesised expectations, some themes initially chosen by the author of this paper, such as socialisation and convergence, could not be explicitly identified at all. The focus group participants did not use these terms. This observation helped discern the prevailing concerns and attention among the Young Diplomats in a new light. Table 2 indicates the theme selection primarily and not exclusively on theoretical or empirical grounds because the author is fully aware that the literature review has played a crucial role in the initial stages of shaping these two distinctions.

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the prevailing Basic Theme was considered worthy of the final categorisation and adherence to one or another word count in this paper.

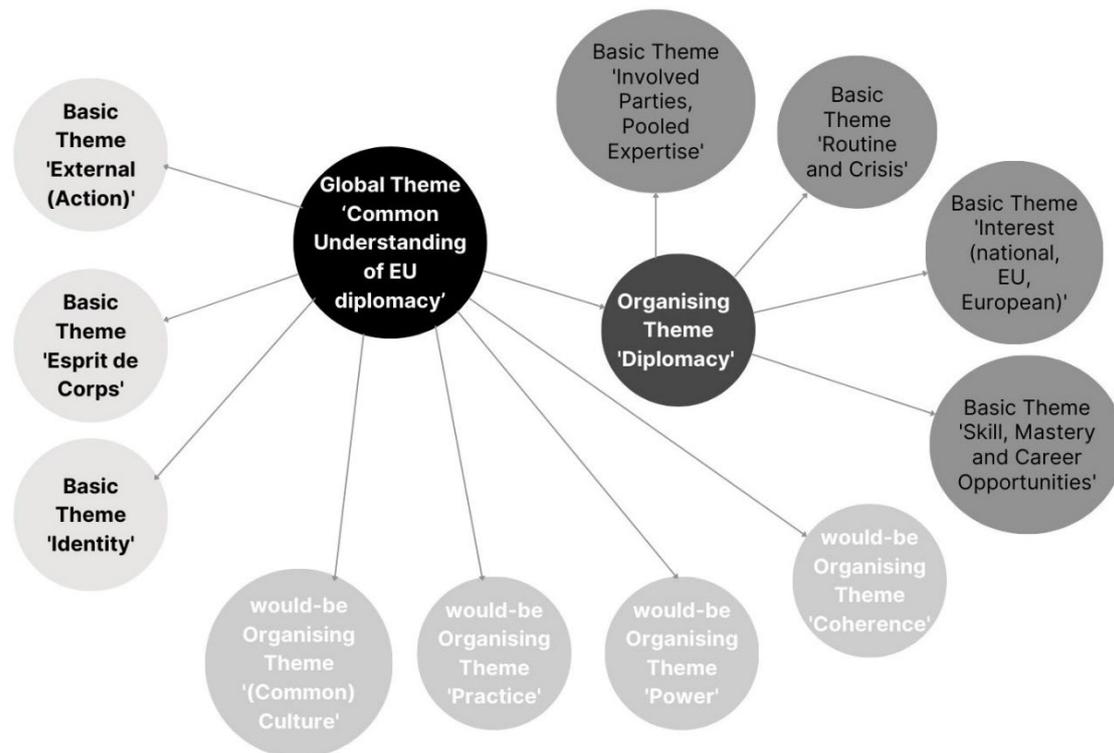
Table 2: Initially Chosen Abstract Themes were re-categorised as Global Themes

Themes selected (primarily) based on theoretical grounds		Themes selected (primarily) based on empirical grounds	
Term	Word count of the coded sentences	Term	Word count of the coded sentences
socialisation	0	external (action)	82
diplomacy, diplomatic, diplomat	2372	(collective) identity	41
culture	189	coherence, coherent	451
esprit de corps	32		
convergence	0		
power	165		
practice	150		

Source: Own transcript-based compilation.

Referring to graph 1, 'Coherence', 'Power', 'Practice', and 'Culture' are designated as would-be Organising Themes because, due to their compact size, there are no profound grounds to branch out a cluster of Basic Themes from each of them. However, their sheer size (word count-wise) being considerably more extensive than the most compact themes coded in the transcript allows ranking all four of them higher than just the Basic Themes 'Esprit de Corps', 'External (Action)', and 'Identity'. These three Basic Themes are not affiliated with a broader cluster united by an Organising Theme. Un-clustered Basic Themes are stand-alone entities with a single and direct bond to the Global Theme.

Graph 1: General Structure of Thematic Network



Source: Own compilation.

### 'Diplomacy' Organising Theme

'Diplomacy' was the only confirmed Organising Theme because it resulted in an evident branching of four Basic Themes depicted in graph 2. The Basic Theme 'Interest' referred to the Young Diplomats' remarks on the EU, European and national interest that feeds into the daily practice of EU diplomacy both regarding the internal meetings behind closed doors and public diplomacy engagements. Interest is the bread-and-butter of the diplomat, irrespective of whether the individual works for the national Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the EEAS. The Young Diplomats identified opportunities for more concerted efforts to build complementarities among various entities engaged in the EU interest articulation and achieve a 'united voice'. Finding a middle way where all interests can be accommodated is essential. Another key trait of EU diplomacy raised by the Young Diplomats was tailoring the diplomatic outreach to the particular context, such as the country where the diplomat is posted. According to at least one student, a significant challenge for fostering this coherence in interest-shaping and articulation is that national diplomatic corps are not incentivised to adopt a European mindset. Ministries of Foreign Affairs seem inward-looking and too pre-occupied with the national considerations.



The third Basic Theme is 'Routine and Crisis Diplomacy'. It is a tiny branch, connected to the preceding branch, but still worthy of being mentioned as a separate thematic thread of this cluster. 'Routine and Crisis Diplomacy' concerns the distinct setting within which a crisis occurs, which lends EU Member States the choice between the go-it-alone mode or a joined-up approach. It was an open-ended remark. Each new crisis offers a lesson on how diverse choices impact the overall performance of EU diplomacy in the short- and mid-term.

The fourth Basic Theme is oriented more towards the individual trajectory related to 'Diplomatic Skill and Master, Career Opportunities' that the Young Diplomats charted for themselves. They grasped from publicly debated controversies how to avoid harming the full potential of EU diplomacy in the future. From daily headlines spotted online and personal experiences, they learned about the importance of various perceptions and perspectives of the EU diplomatic sayings and doings. The Young Diplomats' remarks allow to argue in this paper that technological affordances are not neutral enablers. They do not lend only positive outreach opportunities. An outreach practice can be contested by the audiences. The examples presented by the Young Diplomats reconfirm some of the scholarly reflections that a competent EU diplomacy performance requires paying attention to a myriad of public positioning and interpretation considerations.

Apart from being a studious learner and having a broad knowledge of EU policies, getting that very Bourdieusian "feel for the game" is essential. Grasping the group dynamics and where opportunity structures lend themselves in interest articulation does not rely solely on technical expertise. The ability to immerse oneself in a given social environment is vital. This ability differs entirely from the diplomatic corps' historical prerequisite of a privileged upbringing (e.g. an aristocratic background). These days, the social constellation or the Bourdieusian field has significantly altered. As one Young Diplomat stressed, social savviness is key when the diplomat has to deviate from the position they are supposed to defend. The same applies to the duty to defend an official position that might not be of personal liking. Manoeuvring the interactions and seizing opportunities not pre-described in the national position requires a good sense of affordance. Individual versatility is essential when navigating diverse policy domains, such as the need to be more assertive in classic foreign policy negotiations instead of the requirement to display amicable and soft-hearted gestures during a cultural exhibition reception.

The Young Diplomats appreciate the role of being posted in another EU Member State to foster a more European personal mindset from the early stages of their career. Being a diplomat from a big Member State is highly regarded due to the observation that diplomats from these countries staff the EEAS highest ranks. The word cloud of the 'Diplomacy' Organising theme displayed in graph 2 attests to the role of EU Member States, with the minor representation of the EEAS being depicted with a minuscule word size. Indeed, the EEAS does not prevail as an often-mentioned term in the overall discussion. Thereby, the prevalent thinking among the Young Diplomats revolves around country considerations and dynamics related to the national practice of interest articulation and position shaping. The author of the paper backtracks that among the potential reasons for such a preoccupation with EU Member States can be prior academic learning, insights obtained through professional or training assignments, as well as the overall national guardianship of foreign and security policy matters and propensity to deal with these domains in a more intergovernmental manner.

Furthermore, the Young Diplomats do not see value in becoming an EU diplomat straight after completing a Blue Book traineeship or some initial professional experience at the European Commission or EEAS. This is an appraisal of diverse institutional settings and what those provide for the professional growth and agility of the intellectual disposition to assess and act upon various regulations and opportunities within the given institutional structures to promote the EU stance. The ability to see the point of all sides and value compromises are essential for an influential EU diplomacy practitioner. Career success is associated with knowing how to smoothen any potential edges and get challenging things on track.

#### *Would-Be Organising Theme 'Coherence'*

The community of the Young Diplomats recognises the importance of coherence at the policy designing, planning, and implementation stages. Some crisis experiences by the EU attest to the importance of striving towards a more coherent stance among all EU Member States. The Young Diplomats value the College as a noteworthy institution conducive to promoting more coherence and a better understanding of its importance among its learners. An example raised by one Young Diplomat is that treaties are not sufficient to attain more horizontal and vertical coherence. The common culture of foreign policy is necessary. A jointly upheld working culture would help surpass the lowest common denominator.



The Young Diplomats single out the vast network of approximately 145 offices worldwide as an important asset for EU diplomacy. They want more attention to be paid to how various Directorates-General of the European Commission could foster a more intelligible position-taking when providing instructions to the EU Delegations. The inner workings of various EU institutional entities are a matter of concern among the focus group participants. Practice of coordination among various EU institutional units is the domain where the Young Diplomats also remind about the tendency of the EU Member States to guard foreign policy as their realm of action and decision-making.

The Young Diplomats prioritise culture as essential to facilitate collaboration among various entities involved in EU diplomacy. A common culture should serve as a shared reservoir of goodwill to reciprocate and show a willingness to understand other perspectives and approaches on specific policy matters. One Young Diplomat touched upon culture in the context of cultural events being among the sites of EU diplomacy practice. The rest of the inputs mainly addressed culture as a shared approach and unwritten (as opposed to rigidly codified) customs towards EU diplomacy.

### *Un-clustered Compact Basic Themes*

The compact size of the coded volume for '*Esprit de Corps*' might stem from its thematic affinity with the ideas expressed by the Young Diplomats concerning the common diplomatic culture; in other words, items coded as belonging to the would-be Organising Theme 'Culture' discussed in the previous subsection. *Esprit de corps* is seen as being essential to create a bond among EU diplomats with very different prior institutional and professional experiences.

The un-clustered Basic Theme 'External (Action)' relies on remarks expressed regarding the resolute stance taken by the EU due to the vicinity of the outbreak of military confrontation. In comparison, on earlier occasions, fighting happening further away from the EU and the migration crisis did not motivate a similar level of a joint approach.

Remarks on the un-clustered Basic Theme 'Identity' echo the profound role of relationality. The EU diplomatic identity makes sense only when placed in a contextual setting. Identity does not have leverage in a vacuum. The Young Diplomats note that there is always some comparative or relational component to another entity. Thus, the way the EU defines itself has much to do with other powers on the international scene. Drawing parallels with the 'Europe-as-power' literature reviewed by Young and

Ravinet (2022), identity has a role in the exploratory journey of what type of power the EU is and will be when the aspiring diplomats embark on their professional journeys and put their intellectual convictions into action.

## Discussion

In response to the research question, the socialisation within an education programme leads students to adopt some degree of shared understanding of EU diplomacy. The thematic network analysis facilitated the identification of one noteworthy branch of the 'Diplomacy' organising theme with the following basic themes: interests (national, EU, European); skills, and career opportunities offered by the diplomatic service; the distinction between routine and crisis diplomacy; and the crucial and multifaceted role of the involved parties and the pooled expertise that comes along with it. Thus, the preconceptions of the Young Diplomats about the pursued profession are thorough, comprehensive and echo the breadth and scope depicted in the reviewed academic literature.

The second most debated theme, which came closer to the aspiration of an Organising Theme but did not result in evident branching of a cluster of Basic Themes, was 'Coherence'. What is noteworthy about the 'Coherence' would-be Organising Theme is that it clearly outcompeted the 'Convergence' Basic Theme. In plain words, convergence was absent in the overall discussion. It was not mentioned directly, nor implicitly. A sustained preference for more coherence is the bedrock of competent EU diplomacy performance. The new generation of diplomats seems more pre-occupied with how to render the multi-layer, multi-tier, horizontally and vertically segmented, routine, and crisis mode EU diplomacy more coherent rather than strive for some type of convergence. This is a noteworthy contribution to the scholarly interest in the role expectations tied to regional organisations, and the EU as the most emblematic example thereof (Parthenay, 2019, 66). The preconception of this learning community ahead of entering the labour market is strongly shaped by the EU diplomatic craft and feel for the game as requiring it living up to the aspirations for more coherence.

The initial choice of abstract themes for refinement to get to the Global Theme, Organising Themes, and Basic Themes has significantly influenced the structure of the analysis and conclusions of this paper. Perhaps this developmental process might be criticised for choosing to take 'Diplomacy' as one of the themes because the paper itself is about EU diplomacy. Thus, obviously, such terms as 'diplomacy', 'diplomatic' and 'diplomat(s)' would feature rather prominently in the focus group conversations.

However, this choice was made without being sure what potential Basic Themes might be generated by this Organising Theme. The author was curious to explore the cluster and what internationally experienced and globally exposed individuals would prioritise as noteworthy issues concerning diplomacy in general.

The disproportionate representation of the selected themes in the final constellation of Organising, would-be Organising, and Basic Themes illuminated the main preoccupations among the Young Diplomats, and which considerations rather form lower priorities. This is one of the advantages of the core steps guiding the thematic networks method. Most importantly, the analysis of the focus group deliberations according to the core steps of thematic network analysis allows approaching the group as an integral entity. The programme creates an intellectual ecosystem that impacts all individuals involved, including the Academic Assistant who is the author of this paper. Undeniably, individuals do not operate in a social vacuum. This is an important acknowledgement of the crucial role that the consideration of relationality and reflexivity in practice theory brings to the study of EU diplomacy with the methodological twist of combining exploratory-descriptive research and a thematic network. Learning is acknowledged as a process deeply influenced by other engaged people.

## **Conclusions**

EU External Action Studies offer an interesting exploratory process of the diversity of perspectives articulated by various academically documented sources that demands a considerable degree of open-mindedness. In this specific case, the receptiveness towards empirical insights that diverge from the expectations generated by the literature review on the pivotal role of convergence of interests and the *esprit de corps* was essential. The new generation of aspiring diplomats prioritises other aspects of an influential conduct of EU diplomacy. Their priorities do not stand in stark contrast with the existing literature. Nevertheless, the Young Diplomats brought to the fore the importance of coherence in the EU interest articulation across its myriad of governance levels, domain-specific policy issues and parties involved implicitly or explicitly in the routine and crisis mode of EU diplomacy.

In an implicit form, some level of convergence of perspectives is present among the Young Diplomats. Nevertheless, that is not the overall preoccupation of the next generation of EU diplomacy staff. The Young Diplomats acknowledge and cherish the diversity of actors involved and the pooled expertise that comes along with it in the

overall practice of EU diplomacy, and they wish to make the most of it to benefit from a more consolidated and united EU stance. It is an emblematic embodiment of how the motto 'united in diversity' resonates.

The hypothesised 'straw' bends in another direction than initially assumed. The evolution of the EU diplomatic culture and *esprit de corps* depends more on improving the EU political and policy coherence and intelligibility rather than convergence around the uniting thematic points prioritised by the Young Diplomats concerning EU diplomacy. Throughout the focus group discussion, participants indicated that they agree with what was said by their peers. Yet, the elaboration with examples and diplomacy dimensions each wished to bring to the discussion varied greatly. These conclusions invite future studies to pay more attention to the distinction between the coherence and convergence of interests that support EU external action for the benefit of a more fine-grained scholarly understanding of EU actorness and the factors that come into play when crafting a united stance. An EU position can be a highly consolidated one or a well-mapped-out and mutually acknowledged mosaic of diverse considerations.

Other themes identified in the network development process attest to the ambition and broad spectrum of considerations that guide the students towards their future careers. However, either due to previous academic lessons, professional and training experiences, or the overall competence of foreign policy being still very much within the patronage of EU Member States, the prevailing remarks on various aspects of EU diplomacy revolved around country considerations, less so touching upon various EU institutions and services. The role of big EU Member States was a reoccurring point of reference, especially for the need to reconcile perspectives emanating from various national and institutional logics to benefit a coherent and jointly owned EU stance.

Future research along the same vein could, for instance, study the European Diplomatic Academy – a pilot initiative launched by the EEAS and also hosted by the College of Europe, bringing together early-career diplomats from the EU Member States and institutions – and to what extent it contributes to forming an *esprit de corps*. Such research would also help shaping the future of EU External Action Studies, including the need to bring closer two research strands, namely, the one focusing on the learning of diplomacy and the other one dedicated to an analytical take on diplomacy as a profession and practice. Such an attempt to tie closer together both bodies of literature would assist in the further exploration of the role of socialisation as a multi-layered rather than fragmented process. The way communities of practice

shape shared notions of diplomacy is a layered process, with each individual bringing recollections and continuous curiosity-driven lessons learnt about diplomacy as a profession and a specific type of long-term personal devotion to the European project.

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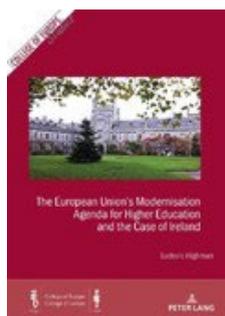
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