



Which Way Forward for the EU at the UNFCCC? An Analysis of the EU's Role at the UN Climate Negotiations

Rebecca TREMAIN (UK) – Prof. SCHUNZ

Abstract

The European Union has long been considered a leader in the United Nations climate negotiations. But with the negotiations now turning their focus towards implementation, and the US withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, what does this mean for the EU's future role? The aim of this thesis is to evaluate the EU's current role in the international climate negotiations, focusing on the period from 2015 through to 2018. It also considers how the EU should adjust its role in the future, in response to the evolving external context. Using role theory, it analyses the EU's self-perception of its role by scrutinising its official communications on its international climate action. It also, and primarily, investigates external perceptions of the EU's role conception and role performance, through surveys with negotiators from both EU Member States and other Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The thesis argues that, in contrast to the EU's self-perception and that of the current literature, its behaviour in the negotiations is not always perceived to demonstrate leadership. It also argues that the perception of the EU's role differs between EU Member States and other Parties to the UNFCCC and varies according to the negotiations' context. The thesis therefore looks beyond the current literature by considering roles other than that of Leader, and by evaluating the EU's role in two different elements of the negotiations: transparency and ambition. The results demonstrate that the EU's role does indeed vary according to context; it is perceived to play an 'Expert Lead-actor' role in the transparency negotiations and a 'Directional Coalition-builder' role on ambition. Negotiators emphasise the value of the EU's technical knowledge and expertise in the transparency negotiations, as well as its efforts at bridge-building across a range of negotiating groups. On ambition, it is considered to lead by example, but developing countries in particular perceive a gap between the EU's rhetoric and its action on the ground. There is a clear difference between the role perception of the EU and of external actors, emphasising the need for further investigation of external perceptions of the EU's role to challenge the current Eurocentric approach. The thesis also discusses what the results mean for the EU's role in the future. It recommends that the EU demonstrates genuine directional leadership to rectify the perceived difference between what the EU says and what it does, and leads by example as the negotiations turn to focus on the implementation of Parties' commitments.