



# Explaining the European Union's Foreign Policy: A Practice Theory of Translocal Action

*By Ekengren, Magnus*

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**I**n June 2016, the European Union (EU) launched its ambitious Global Strategy, on the initiative of Federica Mogherini, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as a response to pernicious global transformations and concomitant complexities threatening the security and fundamental values of the Union. It aimed at reconstructing the EU as a stronger global actor responsible for promoting peace, democracy and stability within internal and external domains. This strategy has been a catalyst for furthering the EU's already extroverted and responsible common foreign policy that manifests itself through civilian and military missions, interventions and crisis management practices outside its borders—with a specific mode of conduct in each situation.

Magnus Ekengren's book, *Explaining the European Union's Foreign Policy: A Practice Theory of Translocal Action*, is a brilliant source in this context, especially when the perceived inadequacy of the contemporary discussion in illuminating the causalities behind EU foreign policy action is taken into consideration. The book elaborates an unorthodox perspective on the reasons, motivations and driving forces behind the EU's foreign policy preferences, as well as on its methods and conduct by presenting two case studies: post-conflict Kosovo in 1999 and the earthquake in Haiti in 2010.

The authenticity of this work lies in its departure from the rigidities and abstract approach of classical international relations theories and its espousal of an anthropological framework in order to prioritise empirical realities in understanding the EU's foreign policy. The reader is given a detailed account with major references to Pierre Bourdieu's "practice theory", Anthony Giddens' "locale of interaction", along with Adler and Pouliot's "transnational practices" study, which evolved into a "practical theory of translocal action". In contrast to those general constructivist claims on the precedence of narratives, social relations and identities over practices, Ekengren claims that social actions and practices generate them through a mutually constitutive reproduction cycle.

He argues that EU foreign policy actions stem from repeated practices that are recognised as competent performances—the right methods of doing things—by "transnational communities of practice" (p.3). Transnational communities of concern transcend

the institutional and territorial boundaries "by a sense of joint enterprise and collective accomplishments" (p.4) as collectivities comprised of officials, diplomats, development personnel, crisis management officers and their relevant confreres working in the UN, OSCE, NATO and so on. EU representatives, the pivotal implementers of the foreign policy actions in our case, modify these practices and apply them into the specific spatio-temporal contexts—in short, they localise them—thus producing the translocal action.

Ekengren challenges the conventional and delimiting conception of the agent-structure relationship that the dichotomy of realism and constructivism problematically hinges on and has been unable to resolve. Practice theory's rejection of pre-empirical conceptions and rationalisations in explaining structures, and the way it distances itself from deterministic, normative or interest-based assumptions, create a more coherent explanatory totality recognising transnational communities of practice as both the agency and the structure "[...] causally condition each other over time" (p.34). Accordingly, decision making in the field of EU foreign policy action is not merely considered as a process of high-level bargains, but instead as a consequence of the aggregated everyday practices of EU representatives who are the first responders to crises as well as the first producers of respective EU action (p.22). This is where the methodological ingenuity of the book comes into play: *Explaining the European Union's Foreign Policy* is based on open-source documents, reports and official documents. In order to compensate for the absence of participant observation due to temporal constraints, Ekengren's research brings in various in-depth interviews with the EU representatives and other institutions such as the UN and OSCE who participated in the interaction chain during the Haiti and Kosovo crises. The study discloses the methodological productivity of practice theory. Instead of relying on merely subjective or objective data relating to the practices of representatives, Ekengren chooses a middle path; he reflexively objectivises the subjective data he gathered from his observations.

Being a former Swedish diplomat, Ekengren's choice of cases was influenced by his personal experiences, and he successfully utilises his expertise and familiarity with the subject. Ekengren's personal involvement in the matters related to Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common

Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as the Deputy Director of the Policy Planning Unit of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs must have served him with a first-hand acquaintance with the EU's foreign policy actions— offering him solid groundwork for his critical approach within an academic circle that has been examining the EU's role as a crisis manager. Aside from the theoretical objection he makes so innovatively, Ekengren problematizes EU institutions and their taken-for-granted cooperative domains. In addition to evaluating institutions such as the European External Action Service or the EU Commission as independent extensions of transnational communities (with little or no interference from national governments), he specifies all the relevant units and their functions in particular localities. Ekengren has previously co-authored *The EU as Crisis Manager: Patterns and Prospects* (2013), a collection of case studies on the EU's crisis management actions that construe the institutionalisation of crisis management capacities as well as its non-negligible relationship with the everyday practices of EU actors. This eventually led to the question of the present study's extensive scrutiny: "What are the driving forces behind specific EU crisis management actions?"

In the first two chapters of "Explaining the European Union's Foreign Policy", Ekengren presents a general outline of his theory and the underlying thesis next to the discussion on the goals of the theory and methodological issues. Transnational practices are respectively categorised into development, diplomatic, humanitarian and defence practices for a critical assessment of EU representatives' ability to produce recognisable foreign policy practices within distinct fields of expertise.

The book strikingly introduces three essential social mechanisms for generating translocal EU foreign policy actions. The first mechanism emerges out of the initial confrontation with crises, those situations where the practices of the EU are unrecognised by transnational communities, yet the representatives strive to produce socially meaningful and recognisable practices of the local kind through strategic acts carried out in an experimental style. The second mechanism is observed when the EU's actions rely on embedded experiences and localised practices that have already been acknowledged transnationally. These practices could be instantiated simply through routinized procedures. The third mechanism entails an innovative process: it implies the transformation

of transnationally recognised actions in order to meet the peculiar needs of particular circumstances and render them as competent translocal practices, which may result in failure as well. Tracing these three mechanisms across distinct locales — particular time-space settings of interaction that condition EU actions as combinations of "EU representatives' habitus of transnational foreign policy practices, the resources and institutions... and the practices... recognised by the... foreign policy collectivity engaged in the locale" (p.37)— constructs the main body of these case studies. The case of post-conflict Kosovo is examined as a cluster of five distinct locales, while the Haitian earthquake disaster consists of three locales.

The third chapter opens with a portrayal of the EU's inactivity and incompetency in the Balkans crisis until the end of the 1990s, and its desire to seek transnational recognition in Kosovo via the use of the first mechanism. Over an analysis of the interactions of the mechanisms in various locales, this chapter explicates how the physical presence of the EU officials on the field helped conduct strategic action by constant interaction with Brussels —in cooperation with other transnational actors such as UNMIK (United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo) and the World Bank— and produces competent localised humanitarian and development practices that condition collective actions of EU institutions in post-conflict Kosovo, in a "bottom-up fashion" (p.107). The fourth chapter explains EU foreign policy action in the aftermath of the Haitian Earthquake of 2010 which left 222,750 people dead and affected one-third of Haiti's population. It describes the success of humanitarian and civil protection officers in adjusting the "transnational practices into localised transnational resources such as the UN centre of coordination in Port-au-Prince" (p.27) in a similar bottom-up fashion. Nevertheless, as Ekengren points out, the situation is different for diplomatic and military practices. In these fields, "top-down strategic acts" culminated in dissociation and internal struggles among the professionals —and their practices— consequently inhibiting the recognition of these practices as localised practices by the transnational diplomatic and defence communities. The last chapter initially discusses the outline of Ekengren's theory of translocal EU foreign policy action via a comparison between the findings of case studies and comes up with the concept of a "translocal recognition cycle" (p.163). Finally, an examination of the pros and cons of the book's perspective are presented with respect

to conventional theories. Here, Ekengren discusses possible hypotheses for further research and the practical implications of his theory for “future reforms of the EU foreign policies and institutions.” (p.163).

To sum up, *Explaining the European Union's Foreign Policy* is a perfect example of the ‘practice turn’ in the field of international relations. The book proposes a Bourdieuan alternative —the practice theory— with a strong aspiration to overcome the limitations of entrenched and conventional analyses on the agent/structure and identity/action relationships, their problematically uncritical perception of the European Union's institutions, lack of inter-contextual connections and generalisability within them, together with their disregard for translocal action. Clear-cut taxonomies and frequently revisited descriptions run

throughout the book, which provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding vis-à-vis the theoretical sophistication of the inquiry— not to mention the clear, simple and intelligible writing style. Alongside its theoretical eclecticism, *Explaining the European Union's Foreign Policy* invents a dynamic lexicon, “a collection of sensitizing concepts” (p.31) by taking various concepts such as ‘practical sense’, ‘strategic action’, ‘structuration’ and ‘locale’ and expanding their semantic sphere to include more responsive and inclusive empirical tools. I strongly recommend this easy-to-read yet brilliant piece to all who are interested in this field. Together with its valuable contribution to the overall literature of international relations, the book stands as a great theoretical and methodological guideline for the researchers in the field.

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic Of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>2</sup> Giddens, Anthony. 1987. *Social Theory And Modern Sociology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Giddens, Anthony. 1989. «A reply to my critics». Chapter in Held, David & Thompson, John B. (arg.). *Social Theory of Modern Societies: Anthony Giddens and his Critics*. 249–301. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Adler, Emanuel, and Vincent Pouliot. 2011. “International Practices”. *International Theory* 3 (1): 1-36.

<sup>5</sup> Adler, Emanuel, and Vincent Pouliot. 2011. *International Practices*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Boin, Arjen, Magnus Ekengren, and Mark Rhinard. 2013. *The European Union As Crisis Manager*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press