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Legitimacy, Credibility and Coherence – Perceptions of  
EU Roles in Global Climate Change Negotiations

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**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**  
Global Governance Programme

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## **Abstract**

The European Union's leadership capacity on the international arena is not decided only by the EU itself. It is also influenced by external actors' perceptions of the EU's roles and by their reactions to EU initiatives. The aim of this paper is to present a conceptual foundation for the study of external perceptions, and especially their effectiveness, and to apply this framework on the EU's involvement in global climate change negotiations. The first task necessitates a discussion of links between the study of perceptions and other theoretical constructs, such as credibility and legitimacy, and the study of EU coherence. I apply this conceptual apparatus to the EU's performance in global climate change negotiations by describing in what ways perceptions of the Union's credibility, legitimacy and coherence in this field have impacted upon its effectiveness, operationalized as perceived influence and leadership, and how this has changed over time.

## **Keywords**

European Union roles; climate change negotiations; legitimacy; coherence; credibility



## **Introduction**

The European Union's leadership capacity on the international arena is not decided only by the EU itself. It is also influenced by external actors' perceptions of the EU's roles and by their reactions to EU initiatives. Is the EU perceived as a legitimate actor that has something valuable to contribute with? Are its promises seen as credible? Are its policies and actions perceived as coherent? In the coming years, the EU is facing a number of important international negotiations, which will shape future global governance structures: new efforts to save a free trade agreement within the World Trade Organization, attempts to decide on global rules to regulate the emission of greenhouse gases, and the EU's aspirations to become a strong global energy governance player just to name a few. In all these cases, outsiders' perceptions of the EU will be key to the Union's impact on the outcome. The EU's economic and financial crisis adds to the uncertainty surrounding EU influence: in what ways may the crisis change other actors' images of the Union?

The aim of this paper is to present a conceptual foundation for the study of external perceptions, and especially their effectiveness, and to apply this framework on the EU's involvement in global climate change negotiations under the UNFCCC. The first task necessitates an explication of why such analyses are important to carry out, but also, and primarily, a discussion of links between the study of perceptions and other theoretical constructs, such as credibility and legitimacy, and the study of EU coherence. I argue that an analysis of outsiders' views of the EU is essential because it a) contributes to our understanding of the EU's self-identification and the roles the EU plays in international politics, and b) provides an insight into how roles influence what impact EU policies have on external actors. Roles are based on both an actor's own role conception and others' expectations (role prescriptions) and shaped in continuous interaction with other actors. What effect EU actions have are influenced by its perceived credibility, legitimacy and coherence. It is difficult to lead if your promises are not credibly backed up. It is improbable that you can be a normative power if outsiders do not perceive your ideas as legitimate. Perceived incoherence – between words and deeds, but also across EU institutions – may create obstacles for the EU's effective action.

After presenting my reasons for emphasizing the analysis of external perceptions as a vital ingredient in the theoretical and empirical repertoire for studying EU foreign policy, I focus on credibility, legitimacy and coherence as three key aspects of external perceptions that help to explain EU effectiveness in its external actions. In the latter part of the paper, I apply this conceptual apparatus to the EU's roles and performance in global climate change negotiations. I describe in what ways perceptions of the Union's credibility, legitimacy and coherence in this field has impacted upon its effectiveness and how this has changed over time. In the concluding section, I briefly discuss how the economic crisis and the rise of emerging powers may have influenced external perceptions of the EU, and link this to recent EU policy proposals in the field of climate change.

## **Why it is important to study external perceptions of the EU**

Experts on EU foreign policy have for many years commented upon the relevance of outsiders' perceptions of the EU. Bretherton and Vogler (2005: 45) noted that "the relationship between internal coherence/consistency ... and perceptions of the EC's presence ... is of central importance" and Hill (1993) made others' expectations a key component of his ideas on a "capabilities-expectations gap", when claiming that there was an alarming mismatch between the hopes other actors held on the EU as an international actor and its relatively limited ability to deliver. Still, there has been a dearth of structured and focused analyses of the role external perceptions play for EU foreign policy. While a number of important empirical works have appeared in recent years (for two excellent overviews, see Lucarelli 2013 and Chaban & Holland 2014), it is still – as we observed already in 2006 (Chaban et al.

2006: 246) - the case that “there is a lack of theoretical explorations in this area” and a need for studies that focus specifically on the theoretical foundations for research on perceptions.

I see two main reasons why scrutinizing external perceptions is an important endeavour (cf. Chaban et al. 2006). First, external images of the EU form a vital part of a process of self-identification of the EU as a political grouping and of shaping the roles the EU play in international politics. Lucarelli (2013: 430) submits that “political identity is not only constructed inside, around aggregating factors such as the recognition of a common past and future, the sharing of values, the legitimisation of common institutions, and the definition of policies /but/ ... is also constructed in the interaction with the outside ... 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”. Roles are by definition shaped both by an actor’s own role conception and by other actors’ expectations and role prescriptions (Holsti 1972; Elgström and Smith 2006; Harnisch 2011), often chiselled out in processes of negotiation with other actors. Outsiders tend to hold relatively persistent views of what role(s) the EU should play in a certain context, determined by previous experience, prevalent images of the EU (partly influenced by the EU’s own declarations) and what is perceived as appropriate EU behaviour (based on normative expectations). These role prescriptions serve to mould EU roles and actual role performance: it is difficult to be a leader if you don’t have followers; strong expectations of a mediator role tend to strengthen such propensities among EU policy makers. Examining external perceptions thus help us to gain an understanding both of the general importance of the EU in the world and of its roles in different negotiation contexts.

### **External perceptions: legitimacy, credibility and coherence**

The second reason why external perceptions are crucial study objects is that they impact upon the effectiveness of EU policies (cf. Chaban et al. 2006; Torney 2014). What the world thinks about the EU is an important factor in facilitating or opposing the achievements of EU policies (Lucarelli 2013). This is true especially when we consider the perceptions of key non-EU diplomats and negotiators, the focus of this paper. Studying external images of the EU helps us to assess whether the EU is considered as exceptional, as a ‘different great power’, *nota bene* if it by other actors is seen as a normative power. The existing literature on EU foreign policy has to a large extent focused on the internal EU decision-making processes, relations between various actors (including Member States, the Commission, the European Parliament and others), EU actor capacity, and the impact of EU policies. Adding an examination of outsiders’ perceptions of EU foreign policy to this analytical toolkit provides us with another key explanatory instrument.

An important *caveat* is in order: obviously, external perceptions are not the only – or even the most important – explanatory factors. As Torney (2014: 2) points out, ‘the question of how external perceptions enable or constrain effectiveness is not straightforward or automatic. Instead, the effect is mediated through the specificities of particular policy areas and international negotiating arenas’. Contextual factors, not least other actors’ preferences and the EU’s position in relation to these, are of key interest here. If other major powers agree, and the EU is in minority position, the Union may be perceived as totally coherent, legitimate and credible and it may still not be able to influence policy outcomes. In the end, a contingent explanatory model, indicating under what circumstances outsiders’ views of the EU should be considered more or less influential, seems to be required.

When examining the impact of external perceptions, there are three qualities of foreign policy that I consider to be of particular importance: outsiders’ perceptions of *legitimacy*, of *credibility* and of *(in)coherence*.

*Legitimacy* is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995: 574). It is thus a subjective, relational quality and defined by an actor’s

perceptions (Hurd 1999: 381). Following Hurd's (1999: 379) general reasoning, there are three generic reasons why an actor may follow the policy advice of another actor: (1) because the actor fears the consequences of not following the advice, (2) because it sees the advice to be in its own self-interest, (3) because it feels that the other actor and its recommendations are legitimate. Legitimacy is thus a source of social influence (as a component of “soft power”): the greater legitimacy an actor has, the easier it will be to persuade others to follow one's policy recommendations (Nye 2007: 177). It is also a relatively ‘inexpensive’ type of influence, as the actor does not have to use its tangible power resources.

In the literature on the EU, a distinction is often made between input and output legitimacy (Scharpf 1999). We propose to add a third dimension, which I label normative legitimacy. Input legitimacy refers to perceived legality of an actor's involvement in decision-making, and thus to institutional design, in this case to whether or not the EU is a recognized player in an institution; an actor which is part of the decision-making machinery. Output legitimacy concerns the perceived achievements of an actor, if it is seen as providing effective outcomes that benefit others. Finally, normative legitimacy refers to whether the norms an actor pursues, or is associated with, are regarded as ‘right’, just and appropriate.

Official recognition of the EU as a player varies across international institutions. In the World Trade Organization, the EU is a full member, represented by the Commission. In most other IGOs, the EU as such does not have membership but it still often acts as a unitary actor where its positions are presented by the country holding the EU Presidency or by Commission spokespersons. Nevertheless, outsiders' positions regarding EU actorness may vary considerably in different contexts and this, coupled with the perceived internal unity of the Union (see below), obviously may have an impact on the effectiveness of EU policy initiatives.

Regarding EU output legitimacy we expect that major economic contributions from the EU, for example in terms of development assistance, increase its perceived legitimacy. We know that countries that are major recipients of EU aid tend to view the EU as a leader and a great power (Chaban et al. 2013). The Union's unilateral initiatives in the area of trade and development (for example, its ‘everything but arms’ initiative), and its economic assistance to developing countries to change their export pattern have contributed to its position, at least in the early 2000's, as a perceived leader in global trade negotiations (Elgström 2014b). When, on the other hand, EU initiatives are not backed up by financial aid this tends to result in decreased credibility (see below). A dilemma for the EU is the fact that once it has started to give economic support, or to make unilateral concessions, external expectations tend to rise, resulting in problems in keeping contributions in pace with expectations (cf. Hill's capability-expectations gap).

The EU's normative legitimacy is closely linked to the debate on the EU as a normative power (Manners, 2002), as the Union's potential to shape others' perceptions of what is good is based on the normative acceptability of the values and ideas that it seeks to promote.

Like legitimacy, an actor's *credibility* is a subjective quality. It depends, we suggest, on perceptions of resource availability, of (dis)unity and of (in)coherence. If threats, promises or other types of commitments are not perceived as being backed up by fungible resources (that is, resources that are ready for use in the issue at hand) other actors are not likely to take them seriously. One potential obstacle to resource availability is domestic resistance to policy decisions. If your domestic political situation is such that your parliament, or national veto players, can be predicted not to support a decision to commit resources for a certain purpose, this will affect your external credibility. In the special case of the EU, disunity may also refer to the distribution of preferences among Member States and institutional actors. Positions taken by the Commission or by the Presidency in an international negotiation, which are in the eyes of others not likely to have the support of a Council majority (or, in case of unanimity decisions, by member state veto players), are not credible and this will weaken your bargaining power. Finally, incoherence over time (shifting positions or behaviour from negotiation to

negotiation) will have an impact on your bargaining credibility and therefore hurt your negotiation strength. If you, for example, have the reputation of unpredictably carrying out some threats, but not others, external actors will be less likely to obey than if you have a consistent record of fulfilling your commitments.

In negotiations with developing countries – *nota bene* the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) talks with African, Caribbean and Pacific states - a lack of credible commitment to additional funding from the EU's side has been seen as an impediment for progress. In the absence of credible promises of economic support, the EU's repeated assurances that it will be a “partner for development” are seen as mere rhetoric (Sheahan et al. 2010). The marginal role of the EU in many areas of ‘high policy’ has often been explained by a perceived absence of EU internal unity, with major member states having differing preferences, diminishing the credibility of united EU action.

The final quality of foreign policy to discuss is coherence (or consistency). Nuttall (2005) makes a distinction between three types of coherence in the EU system: horizontal, institutional and vertical. To this can be added two other categories: chronological and implementation coherence. Horizontal coherence means that policies with external implications, pursued by different parts of the EU machinery, should be consistent with each other. Institutional coherence refers to external relations positions being coherent, regardless of whether decisions are taken in a supranational or an intergovernmental context. Vertical coherence addresses coherence among member states and between member states and EU institutions. Chronological coherence refers to consistency over time (see above), while implementation coherence means consistency between words and deeds.

Existing empirical research results on the EU as an actor in multilateral negotiations indicate that institutional coherence does not seem to pose any major problem: the EU is mostly pictured as one, monolithic actor across the board. Nor is chronological incoherence mentioned as a problem. Vertical incoherence is in the EU literature alluded to as a major type of consistency problem in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, while it is seldom referred to in trade or environmental negotiations. In general, the major irritants seem to be horizontal and implementation incoherence. In trade negotiations, the gravest concerns are caused by perceived inconsistency between the EU's principled free trade approach and its protectionist agricultural policy (Elgström 2007), but also by its insistence on bringing environmental and human rights elements into trade discussions, reflecting pressures from various strong domestic constituencies. The Union’s “policy coherence for development” has been addressed as another problematic area, where commercial interests and sustainable development concerns clash when lofty objectives are to be transformed into concrete policies (Stocchetti 2013). Implementation incoherence has also been highlighted in the EPA negotiations where the developing countries have perceived the EU rhetoric on partnership for sustainable development as ‘empty words’ (Sheahan et al. 2010), diminishing their willingness to follow the EU model. Perceived incoherence may have grave consequences in the long run. In the words of Nuttall (2005: 94), “it matters a great deal if the perception of inconsistency brings the Union into contempt and thereby impairs its effectiveness to act”.

## **The EU in global climate change negotiations: external perceptions and effectiveness**

In this section, I apply my conceptual apparatus to one issue-area, climate change, where the EU has been an active participant in negotiations since the 1990s. In this context, I use perceived influence and leadership as indicators of effectiveness. If outsiders consider the EU to have been had an impact upon outcomes, and/or perceive the EU to have moved negotiations forward towards the achievement of EU goals, I take this as indications of effectiveness. I have divided my analysis into four sub-sections, each covering a certain time-period. This empirical section relies on two different types of data, besides secondary sources. The first consists of surveys, handed out to COP participants (members of party delegations as well as NGO representatives and researchers) between 2008 and 2010. This material was collected by a Swedish research team and has been presented in a number of

scientific articles (Karlsson et al. 2011, 2012; Parker et al. 2012). The second is *elite interviews*, carried out by a previous co-author after COP 14 in Poznan 2008 (reported in Kilian and Elgström 2010) and by the author at the mid-term negotiation in Bonn in May 2012, covering the COPs in Copenhagen and Durban (reported in Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013). These interviews are with key negotiators, mainly from outside the EU.

### ***The EU in climate change negotiations before and after Kyoto: from laggard to leader***

‘Since the early 1990s, the EU has increasingly established itself as an international leader (...) most prominent[ly] in the paradigmatic area of climate change’ (Oberthür & Kelly 2008: 35). This and similar assessments (e.g. Grubb & Gupta 2000; Vogler 2005) reflect a consensus on EU leadership on climate change among academics. The shouldering of the leader role by the EU has mainly been associated with the abdication of US leadership in connection with the Kyoto Protocol.

It took, however, the EU considerable time and effort to develop leadership capacities in this area. The EU has been described as a laggard in international negotiations on the protection of the ozone layer in the 1980s mainly due to diverging national positions and interests, institutional constraints and attempts from some member states to protect their chemical industries. The US was the frontrunner in establishing the framework for the Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer (1985) and its Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer (1987) (Oberthür 1999; Vogler & Bretherton 2006: 98-9). In the 1990s however Europe developed into playing a ‘partial leadership role’ (Oberthür 1999) in the ozone regime.

In 1995, the first meeting of Conference of the Parties (COP) of The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) took place in Berlin. The EU pushed for an agreement with binding timetables and emission reduction targets and succeeded in reaching such an outcome in Kyoto two years later. The creation of the 1997 Kyoto Protocol represented a high point for EU global leadership. In the negotiations, ‘the EU was the most proactive and ambitious actor among industrialized countries’ (van Schaik and Schunz 2012: 179). Arguably, its role as an ideational vanguard created a high degree of *normative legitimacy*, while its unilateral initiatives to reduce its own emissions increased its *credibility*. An actor that takes voluntary action ‘at home’ to diminish global problems is logically also considered more credible in its leadership ambitions.

The Kyoto Protocol established that the developed states should reduce greenhouse gas emissions by five to eight per cent from 1990 levels in the period 2008-2012. Furthermore, the ‘common but differentiated obligations’ for the more than 150 developing countries that are exempt from mandatory emission cuts was reaffirmed. This solution represented a success for EU’s environmental diplomacy - although it failed to realize other key objectives than the agreement on fixed reduction targets - mainly due to its well-prepared proposals (ideational leadership) and its unilateral promises (directional leadership). The firm commitment of the EU to restrict binding reductions to industrialized countries garnered support from the developing states and helped to establish its *legitimacy* in these circles. The fact that the EU was able to present itself as one actor, standing united behind its policy objectives, increased its perceived *coherence* and thereby also its *credibility*.

It would take eight years until the Kyoto Protocol entered into force 2005 and during this time period it was repeatedly proclaimed dead. Between 2000 and 2005, the EU’s leadership was guided by the objective to save the Kyoto Protocol. With the Bush administration’s rejection of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, EU embarked on a mission to secure support in terms of ratifications from industrialized countries such as Japan, Russia and USA. The EU gained Russia’s ratification in exchange for EU’s support of Russia’s candidacy for WTO membership, which can be seen as example of structural leadership (Parker and Karlsson 2010). Thanks to the EU’s efforts at COP7 in Marrakesh in 2001, the Kyoto Protocol was made operational. This probably had the effect of strengthening its (*output*) *legitimacy*, as it demonstrated its commitment to actively contributing to international governance mechanisms.

### ***Perceptions of the EU at COP 14 in Poznan: Still an environmental leader***

There was in our interview material a unanimous agreement among external negotiators that the Union was at the time of the Poznan meeting (2008) still a leader in climate change diplomacy. This was the case regardless of whether the interviewee represented a developing or a developed country. Noteworthy in this context is that even the ‘heavyweights’ on the international scene, the US, Japan, and China, all affirmed the Union’s leading role. This indicates that the international weight of the EU in climate change politics at this time was considerable, and also its status as a *legitimate* climate actor. Observers underlined that ‘[the EU] has been on the forefront for many years. It’s been the strongest advocate of action’ (UNEP) and has been showing ‘a number one leadership compared to other countries’ (Japan). The Union’s own leadership rhetoric was echoed by interviewees, both from developing and developed countries, who stated that ‘the EU plays a key role in the making and implementation of climate change policy’ (Iceland, cf. Indonesia; China). What adds to this evaluation is that EU leadership was also assessed as consistent, across EU actors and over time (all interviewees). Thus, the EU was perceived as a *chronologically and vertically coherent* actor. On the question how they perceived the ‘general impact’ of the EU in international climate policy, only two respondents stated the Union’s influence to be ‘modest’ (Venezuela, Argentina), while all other respondents found the EU to have a ‘huge impact’. This was often associated with the character of the Union as a coherent ‘negotiation block’ that consists of 27 member states, which increases its *credibility* and ultimately gives the EU stronger influence (Japan). The Union’s self-perception as a *coherent* actor was thus by and large shared by external actors. There was agreement that the EU succeeds to negotiate as a block and that its positions are well developed and co-ordinated, leading to the conclusion that that its negotiation behaviour ‘can be very effective’ (UNEP; Venezuela). The EU’s *credibility* was arguably also strengthened by new unilateral initiatives, for example the 2007 announcement to unilaterally reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 20 per cent compared to 1990 levels by 2020.

The survey results presented by Karlsson et al. (2012) confirm this picture. No less than 62 per cent of the respondents considered the EU to ‘play a leading role’ in the negotiations. This made the EU by far the actor with the highest perceived leadership acclaim, China being given this label by 47 and the US by 27 per cent. More than half of the respondents recognized the Union’s leadership quality in all geographical regions but Africa and this perception was shared by government officials and NGO representatives alike. Clearly, at the time of COP 14, the EU was still the main, and most influential, leader in the eyes of external observers.

### ***Perceptions of the EU at COP 15 in Copenhagen: a retreat from leadership position***

The Copenhagen climate summit has generally been seen as a set-back for the EU (Spencer et al. 2010), or even as a negotiation failure (European Voice 2010). The EU was sidelined in the final hours of the negotiations when it was presented with a text agreed upon by the US and the newly emerging BASIC bloc of Brazil, South Africa, India and China: ‘there was a recognition that the EU had been upstaged at best and humiliated at worst’ (Curtin 2010). The EU’s leadership ambition had been stunned and its ‘top-down targets and timetable’ approach seems to have been replaced by a ‘bottom-up unilateral pledge-and-review’ approach, advocated by the US and China (Egenhofer & Georgiev 2009). It is this kind of observations that have led analysts to call the EU a ‘hobbled giant’ or an ‘economic giant but political dwarf’ (Walker 2000/01).

The EU had since the 1990s primarily relied on a directional leadership strategy (Kilian and Elgström 2010; Parker and Karlsson 2010; Parker et al. 2012). Grubb and Gupta (2000: 21-2) define this mode of leadership as having two components. The first is leading by example, primarily through the effect of domestic actions. The second component concerns the diffusion of these perceptions through active promotion of the leader’s vision and frames. Domestically developed solutions, accordingly, serve as a model that can be disseminated internationally. A recent illustration of the

EU's endeavour for directional leadership was its ambitious 2008 energy and climate package. At COP13 in Bali, the Union released its headline goals where it called for developed states to cut their collective emissions by at least 30 per cent and the emerging powers to limit growth in their emissions by 15-30 per cent (Parker et al. 2012). The latter objective reflected that EU wanted to tear down the 'firewall' between developed and developing countries, by making climate targets mandatory also for the large developing countries. The EU strategy of reciprocity meant that its 30 per cent reduction target was conditional on comparable emission reductions from industrialized states but also mitigation actions by major developing countries, where China and India were the main targets (Wu 2012: 8).

However, the directional leadership and the norm-driven attempt to create a legally binding agreement involving all major emitters, was unsuccessful in Copenhagen for several reasons. Some have argued that the EU was unable to lead by example as its unilateral promises were not considered environmentally ambitious enough (Spencer et al. 2010; Parker et al. 2012). This could imply a weakening of the EU's perceived *normative legitimacy*. This was combined with an absence of new unilateral initiatives, which arguably lowered its *output legitimacy*. Others claim that its pledges were not *credible*, due to the internal disunity of the Union, where some Member States, had openly questioned the targets set by the Commission (Parker and Karlsson 2010: 937; Roberts 2011: 779), resulting in a perceived loss of *vertical coherence*. A third explanation was that the EU's strategy was too normative and politically naïve, disregarding the dynamics of the negotiation context, permeated by short-sighted economic self-interests (van Schaik and Schunz 2012). The Union is claimed to have tried to 'upload its preferred policy solutions to the international level' (van Schaik and Schunz 2012: 183) without taking the realism of its effort into account. The EU's insistence on quantitative targets derived from science ran counter to predominant configurations of power and logics of action. Other major actors were, in fact, not receptive for this kind of norm-driven arguments (van Schaik and Schunz 2012: 183). Furthermore, the EU was accused by developing countries for attempting to 'kill' the Kyoto Protocol by advocating a single legally binding treaty replacing the Kyoto Protocol (Wu 2012:15). Such perceived ambitions, true or not, served to lower the EU's perceived *legitimacy* among developing states. The EU strategy of proposing a one-track negotiation process toward a protocol including all developed and developing countries thus spurred suspicion among developed countries, including 'progressive' major developing countries (South Africa, Brazil and Mexico) that opened up for reduction targets under the convention track. EU was accused for being hypocritical and was increasingly isolated at COP15 (Spencer et al. 2010).

Survey results forcefully demonstrate the effects of the EU's 'failure' in Copenhagen. The share of respondents that saw the Union as exerting leadership went down from 62 per cent in 2008 to 46 the year after (Karlsson et al. 2012; Parker et al. 2012). At the same time, the share that recognized the US as a leader rose from 27 to 53, while China remains on the same level, going from 47 to 48 per cent. We thus see a sharp decline in perceptions of EU leadership, while the Union still enjoys about the same level of leadership recognition as other major actors. A word of caution is in order, however. The phrasing of the survey question, asking the respondents what countries 'played a leading role' in the negotiations could be interpreted as relating not only to leadership (in terms of 'actively taking initiatives to take the negotiations forward toward a set of common goals by engaging followers', approximating the definition by Underdal 1994) but also to 'importance' or 'influence'. If respondents made such an interpretation, this could explain why the US, that was not by my interviewees perceived to have exerted leadership, show these high figures. The US and China were undoubtedly influential in Copenhagen, regardless of their leadership qualities.

Still, the decline in perceived EU leadership is undisputable. It is, according to the survey data, especially visible among Asian, European, Latin American and Pacific observers while participants from Africa and North America did not change their evaluation to the same extent. Europeans are still the respondents that mostly credit the EU with leadership qualities (but dropping from 75 to 65 per

cent in Copenhagen). The decline is evident among all types of respondents, from negotiators to NGO representatives.

Our interview material, which in this case is rather restricted, largely confirms the survey results. Copenhagen is described as a ‘failure’ for the EU (Japan; Norway), although one interviewee (US) argues that the EU did what it could, but that expectations of its potential impact were exaggerated, leading to the impression that the Union did not live up to its goals. Furthermore, the Copenhagen experience left EU negotiators traumatized (Japan) and prone to too much introspection (US).

In brief, the evidence from all our different sources coincides. Copenhagen is seen as low-water mark for EU climate change diplomacy. It was perceived as without influence on the final outcome. Its perceived leadership dropped dramatically, compared to the situation in previous COPs. This outcome can, as demonstrated above, easily be associated with *weakened legitimacy, perceived incoherence* and a *loss of credibility*.

### ***Perceptions of the EU at COP 16 in Cancun and COP 17 in Durban: Leadership partially regained***

COP16 in Cancun in 2010 managed to revitalize the multilateral process. The Cancun agreements represented a ‘Copenhagen Accord plus’ (Oberthür 2011:6); it did not challenge the post-Copenhagen climate order, but rather confirmed the non-binding ‘pledge and review’ system. Compared to the Copenhagen debacle, the EU performed better according to our interviewees. It ‘helped the process’ (US) by acting as a bridge between major emitters with the aim to shape a coalition for a new treaty. The EU’s active participation in the ‘Cartagena Dialogue for Progressive Action’ between 30 developed and industrialized states from different blocs in advance of the Cancun summit is seen as a sign of recovery of leadership and paved the way for its coalition-building activities in Durban (Switzerland; US; cf. Oberthür 2011). This is reflected in survey figures – but only when we scrutinize EU leader recognition among negotiators and government officials. These figures rise with ten percentages from 2009, while the overall result is status quo (Karlsson et al. 2012).

Several commentators have argued that COP 17 in Durban was a triumph for European climate diplomacy and at least a partial recovery of EU’s leadership after Copenhagen (Verolme 2012; Wu 2012). Our interviewees agree. In their view, the EU ‘was key in Durban’ (Mexico). It played a critical role in crafting a renewed Kyoto Protocol and the Durban Platform that launched a process for arriving at new treaty in 2020 (Canada; Egypt; Japan; Mexico; Switzerland). In terms of negotiation strategies, I have elsewhere argued that the EU shifted from a directional and ideational leadership, based on normative aspirations, to a more realistic approach (Bäckstrand and Elgström 2013). It downsized its objectives and became a bridge-builder between the major emitters. The Union’s changed role is best captured by the notion of the EU as a ‘leadiator’, a leader-cum-mediator that worked with, rather than against the changing geo-political context of climate change where BASIC had emerged as a veto power. I would argue that this more realistic approach increased the Union’s perceived credibility. It was now again seen as an actor committed to reach environmental results.

The EU entered the negotiations with a two-pronged strategy. It made its acceptance of a renewed Kyoto Protocol conditional to the simultaneous signing of a roadmap towards a legally binding agreement that included all major emitters (Japan; Norway; US). The unilateral commitment to continue its Kyoto obligations helped to increase its *legitimacy*, especially in the countries that had most at stake if emissions continued unabated. At the same time, the EU forged a new alliance with island states and African countries (Canada; Japan; Mexico; Switzerland). This coalition was enabled by cracks in the formerly unitary G77 bloc (Roberts 2011: 779) and a growing rift between BASIC countries and low-lying islands, but was also facilitated by the EU’s previous effort to forge informal coalitions outside the UN process (notably the Cartagena process). This new alliance demanded a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol and a roadmap to negotiate a new legal instrument covering all countries.

While EU's reciprocal linkage strategy in Copenhagen, where it promised to take on a 30 per cent reduction target in exchange for comparable emission commitments by other countries, failed, the EU succeeded in Durban in securing an agreement to a new global all-inclusive and binding agreement to be concluded in 2020 in exchange for the EU's agreement to sign up for extension of the Kyoto Protocol after 2012. The EU was in Durban also largely perceived as *vertically coherent* actor, especially when compared to the process leading up to Copenhagen. According to one source, the EU 'played an important role in crafting an agreement' (Mexico). Pressure from the EU-island states-African coalition, linked to a reluctance in China and India to openly go against their climate-vulnerable G77-partners, paved the way for the Durban platform, but the EU's active and deliberate attempts to find a compromise with the BASIC countries, and with the US, also contributed. Accordingly, the Union combined credible directional leadership with bridge-building activities, that is, acting as a 'leadiator'.

There is in the interview material another story, however, that is less flattering to the EU. It says that the EU has joined the US in policies and behaviour that in fact transfer the burden of climate change adaptation to the developing countries (Egypt). The resources that are devoted to technology transfer and climate change mitigation in poor countries are far too small and do not increase; rather, the rich countries refuse to commit themselves to the massive sums that are needed to save the vulnerable Third World countries. The US may be more outspoken and blunt but the EU is nevertheless following the same policy. Although this story was told by only one interviewee, it mirrors images found in LDC descriptions of EU behaviour in, for example, the Economic Partnership Agreement negotiations (Elgström 20xx).

### **Concluding discussion:**

#### **EU influence and perceived legitimacy, credibility and (in)coherence**

I have in the empirical section described and analyzed the EU's perceived leadership and influence in climate change negotiations from Kyoto to Durban. I have also highlighted possible links between its influence and outsiders' perceptions of its legitimacy, coherence and credibility. I will now aggregate these findings and draw some tentative conclusions on the impact of external perceptions on EU effectiveness (for a more critical view of the EU's effectiveness in climate change, and its links to external perceptions, see Torney 2014). I will also consider what effects the EU's economic and financial crises may have had in this respect.

Obviously, the empirical foundations for my conclusions may be challenged. We have "measured" – by interviews with key negotiators – external perceptions of the EU, its roles and its influence. We did not ask directly about the respondents' attitudes towards EU legitimacy, credibility and coherence. At times, the interviewee's answers have revealed such linkages, but in no way in a structured and consistent way. My conclusions are therefore partly based on logical reasoning. They have to be treated as preliminary and mainly suggestive.

It is still, I believe, possible to make plausible logical connections between fluctuations in the Union's influence and changes in outsiders' perceptions. During the Kyoto process, but also in the period leading up to the Poznan meeting of 2008, the EU was seen as internally united (*vertically coherent*) and as normatively legitimate. Its unilateral activism resulted in directional leadership: the EU's one-sided and voluntary commitments, and its policy to exempt the developing countries from making reductions in their emission of greenhouse gases, were perceived as normatively legitimate, especially among Third World countries. This, together with its internal cohesion, increased its credibility as a normative leader in the field of climate change. Such an image was probably strengthened by the US decision not to ratify the Kyoto protocol.

In Copenhagen, the EU's decision to try to impose mandatory reductions of emission also on developing states, notably the growing economies, seems to have dramatically deteriorated its

legitimacy in the eyes of developing states. At the same time, internal disunity, with some Member States questioning further unilateral reductions, lowered its perceived vertical coherence, leading to a decrease in credibility. A perceived lack of ambition in the EU's policy proposals before the conference may have strengthened this trend. This demonstrates the close link between domestic politics, external perceptions and influence. Perceived splits and divisions may make promises of future EU actions less credible, as there will be doubts about the capacity of the Commission to implement its proposals in the face of internal opposition.

In Durban, the EU's decision to continue supporting the Kyoto protocol increased its perceived normative legitimacy, notably among developing countries. In general, its fight for a strong climate change regime gave it credit and made possible coalitions with states in danger of environmental losses. A perceived increasing realism in the EU's policies made it a credible 'leadiator' that could lead the discussion towards future agreements.

After Durban, media reports indicate that that a perceived unwillingness from the Union's side to commit itself to substantial economic transfers to developing states in need of climate protection investments may have decreased the legitimacy of the EU (Elgström 2014a). Similarly, the Commission's proposal in early 2014 to set a 40 % reduction goal for 2030, and a 27 % goal for energy from renewable sources, while having no specific objective for energy effectiveness, has been criticized both by green activists in Europe and by endangered developing country representatives as being far too little. Again, references have been made to domestic resistance in some Member States, notably Great Britain and Poland, diminishing the credibility of the Union as an environmental vanguard.

It is hardly a co-incidence that the EU's perceived legitimacy and credibility started to deteriorate in connection with the on-set of the economic and financial crisis beginning in 2008. An economic down-turn threatens jobs and endangers societal welfare. In many European countries, this has created a negative attitude towards policy proposals that were interpreted as decreasing internal competitiveness, including unilateral promises of environmental measures. There might also be a reluctance to commit oneself to further external financial transfers, for example to developing countries to reduce their vulnerability to climate change.

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