

Single Representative, Single Voice: Magical Thinking and the Representation of the EU on the World Stage

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Abstract

It is frequently argued that the EU should speak with a single voice on the international stage in order to play an effective role in the field of foreign policy. The representation of the EU by a single representative is often viewed as a remedy to this lack of a single voice. This article analyzes that argument and asks whether the relative disillusionment that followed the appointment of a president of the European Council and of a high representative of the EU suggests that stronger EU representation on the world stage is needed. The article argues that equating the institutionalization of a single representative with an ability on the part of the EU to speak with a single voice amounts to 'magical thinking' because no institutional engineering can overcome member states' divisions. Furthermore, different successful cases of external action led by a few member states in spite of the lack of unanimity show that the single voice is an unhelpful myth. Lastly, the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty reforms reveals that the EU does not need stronger external representation and that any principle of representation relying on personalization should be dismissed as inadequate in the EU context.

Policy Implications

- The idea of a single voice as a necessary condition for EU foreign policy should be abandoned. The obsession with consensus and apparent cohesion is unjustified and can even be harmful. Disagreements among member states should not be considered a major hurdle to collective action because experience shows that they do not prevent the effective external action of subgroups of member states.
- Institutional reforms aimed at 'embodying' the EU by giving it a face or representing it through charismatic leaders are unsuited to the EU context. Collegial direction is preferable. No additional principle of external representation should be introduced, although the principles of external representation as laid down in the Lisbon Treaty should be clarified.
- The democratic election of a president of the EU would add a new type of problem to existing ones, notably by feeding populism and nationalism, impoverishing the political debate and weakening the EU's unity.

It has become typical in political and academic circles to fret about the EU's lack of a single voice on the world stage in matters of foreign policy. Critics regularly invoke Henry Kissinger's apocryphal statement,¹ 'who do I call if I want to call Europe?' Furthermore, practitioners and scholars often claim that this lack of a single voice amounts to a lack of visible representation of the EU on the world stage. For this reason, they sometimes argue that the representation of the EU by a single individual would allow the EU to communicate a clear and unified position. The creation of two external representative positions – a high representative for foreign affairs and security policy and a president of the European Council – in the Lisbon Treaty has been presented as a remedy for this supposed deficit. This article aims to analyze the

argument according to which the appointment of a single external representative would allow the EU to speak with a single voice in matters of foreign policy. Moreover, it asks how the EU should be represented on the international stage by analyzing two possible forms of representation: on the one hand, does the relative public disillusionment that followed the appointments of Catherine Ashton and Herman Van Rompuy, who were supposed to 'embody' the EU, imply that the EU should be represented more strongly on the international stage? In this respect, the most ambitious proposal is the democratic election of an EU president. On the other hand, should we interpret this disillusionment as a sign that the principle of the representation of the EU as a single actor on the world stage should be abandoned?

This article contends that the argument according to which the appointment of a single representative would allow the EU to speak with a single voice in matters of foreign policy² is less clear than it seems to be at first sight, and criticizes the assumptions on which it relies. Furthermore, the article argues that while the necessity of a single voice in foreign affairs has become a near-unassailable myth, it is unnecessary – in part because member states can provide for efficient external actions, even in the absence of a general agreement at the EU level. As the pervasive divisions between member states show, a representative who would convey the EU's so-called single voice would betray the EU rather than represent it: to recall a German pun, he or she would be a *Verräter* [betrayed] rather than a *Vertreter* [representative]. For this reason, this article argues that the only viable and sensible type of world-stage EU representative would be not a charismatic leader but a mediator-informer of EU plurality.

The first section of this article shows that the claim that the institution of a single representative would allow the EU to speak with a single voice amounts to magical thinking. In addition, it argues that speaking with a single voice is not even a requirement for efficient external actions. The second section examines the reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty (i.e. the appointment of a president of the Council and of a high representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy) and their effects. The third section argues that even if, in the wake of the disenchantment that followed these reforms, one believes that a more charismatic representation of the EU would remedy its lack of visibility on the world stage, there are several good reasons to oppose such institutional reform, in particular the election of a president of the EU. The conclusions contend that expectations about the performance of a single EU representative should be lowered drastically and dismissed as both unrealistic and dangerous the assumption that the EU should speak with a single voice in matters of foreign affairs.

Single representative, single voice: the weaknesses of a common assumption

To recapitulate the expectation–capability gap paradigm (Hill, 1993; see also Ginsberg, 1999), it is often believed that the institution of a single representative would help to reduce this gap by extending the capability of the EU in matters of foreign policy. Independent of the legal issues and ambiguities raised by the representation of the EU globally, which we do not address here (for analysis of this aspect see Dony (2009) and Wessel and Van Vooren (2013)), the correlation between the institution of a single representative and the ability of the EU to speak with a single voice is not established; it relies, in fact, on a confusion between representation as a procedure and

the possibility for the EU to find general agreements and unified positions. A representative of the EU would not necessarily allow member states to find such agreements. The argument confuses formal representation and the act of speaking with one voice in two distinct ways.

The single representative as an actualizer of the EU's single voice

On the one hand, the single-representative argument could imply that the *possibility* of the EU speaking with one voice exists already. An EU representative would need only to *communicate* the EU's 'position' on matters of foreign policy (Lynch, 2005).³ However, this assumption is of course naïve because it is obvious that in most sectors – particularly when it comes to foreign policy – there is no general agreement among member states, as shown by the low legislative productivity in the sectors in which unanimity (and not qualified majority voting) is the rule. For instance, the recent crises in Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic have revealed once again the difficulties facing EU member states in finding common positions and deciding on joint action – all the more so because such decisions had to be taken in a context of emergency. To assume both that the ability to speak with a single voice in foreign policy matters exists and that we would only need a representative to make good on this ability is to overlook the fact that the EU is founded on a complex balance of power, with an institutional design and decision-making processes that are aimed at accommodating the diversity of member states' positions and interests, and are certainly unable to repress or overcome this diversity. Attempting to institutionalize a single voice by assuming that a single representative could actualize the EU's single voice is unrealistic.

The single representative as a magician: creating a single voice from a plurality of voices

On the other hand, and more trickily and seriously, even if we acknowledge the fact that the EU does not speak with one voice, one might believe that the external representation of the EU by a single actor would allow the Union to find common positions in the field of foreign policy.

This common argument is symptomatic of an excessive confidence in the power of institutions and institutional reforms. Of course, institutions shape outcomes. For instance, in matters of international trade, voting rules determine the ability of member states to arrive at a common position (Meunier, 2000). But it is also true that in those fields member states, by pooling their sovereignties, had *previously* agreed upon voting rules that would help them to reach general agreements.

When it comes to foreign-policy matters, the mere creation of a single representative cannot help to reduce disagreements between member states. As Menon (2009) correctly notes, 'no amount of institutional tinkering can circumvent the need for national governments to agree in order that policies be adopted' (quoted by Howorth (2010), p. 456).

In fact, assuming a connection between the institution of a single representative and the ability of the EU to speak with a single voice amounts to magical thinking – that is, to an erroneous conception of causality. In matters of foreign policy, member states cooperate if they deem that it is in their interest, not because a president urges them to do so (Zielonka, 2008, p. 73). Given the plurality of member states' legacies and the diversity of their strategic interests abroad – in particular all member states do not rely on the same type of energy resources, the protection of which is a fundamental incentive to intervene abroad – it is unlikely that common stances on questions of foreign policy will be reached frequently. In most international crises, member states have been divided on the appropriate strategy to follow; these divisions are so deep there is no reason to think that any representative could overcome their cleavages. An EU representative who would convey a single voice on the world stage would more likely betray member states than represent the EU as a whole.

To assume that the institution of a single representative would allow EU member states to find common positions in foreign affairs is to look at the problem upside down. One has to consider to what extent the EU is legally and politically able to act in the field of foreign policy to determine the most appropriate principle of EU external representation. As the next section will argue, the absence of general agreements among member states has not prevented some EU member states from jointly taking efficient civilian actions, in the past and more recently.

The unnecessary myth of the 'single voice'

Occam's razor would help to dismiss the notion of the single voice as an unhelpful myth. The point is not to argue that the EU should not be ambitious as a global actor (on this aspect, see Howorth (2010) and Agh (2012), for instance), but to acknowledge that the EU can be present on the world stage in the absence of consensus between its member states. The myth of the single voice may originate in an erroneous conception of the EU as a state (Telo, 2013, pp. 40–44). However, it is necessary to devise instruments for foreign action that are a pragmatic fit with the EU's original organization. Furthermore, from a normative point of view, displaying unanimity is not even desirable when member states have legitimate motives to disagree. There are several

reasons for which EU member states do not need to reach unanimous positions in order to take external action.

First of all, claiming that the EU can be present on the world stage only when it has common positions is only likely to lower its ability to take external action. Rather, it is by not imposing this unanimity as a necessary condition for external action that the EU can become a more efficient global actor.

Second, as argued earlier, one should distinguish formal representation and the problem of the EU's single voice, or lack thereof. For reasons of political communication, it is legitimate to appoint an EU representative who is able to convey to external partners the different positions of EU member states, but it is unreasonable to require that this representative should present to the external partners only positions that are supported by all member states. One might argue that the single-voice narrative acts as an efficient engine for further internal unity (for an analysis of this function of foreign policy, see Bickerton (2010)). One could also object that even if no common position is realistic in the current state of affairs, further unity within the EU in foreign affairs is still desirable. However, even if the idea that consensus should be a cornerstone of EU policies might have been a powerful driver in the past, it is time to acknowledge that apparent consensus at any price can have more costs than benefits.

Furthermore, a recent article by Gehring et al. (2013) advances new evidence to show that what matters is not how the EU is represented, but the ability of member states to coordinate. Their research shows that the EU is recognized as a relevant actor in international institutions if it has the capacity to act – 'action capability', as the authors term it – in the relevant domain of the international institution. Interestingly, the EU can have formal membership of an international institution but not be recognized as a relevant actor because it lacks action capability in the domain of the international institution to which it belongs. This finding implies that when the EU has real action capability in the domain of the institution to which it belongs, it is able to shape the political debate and to influence the decision-making process. But in the domains in which the EU has no real action capability, it is not recognized as a relevant actor and individual member states are listened to rather than the representative of the EU – even if he or she officially has a right to speak for the EU. Therefore, they argue,

While the form of representation may have symbolic or practical implications, it does not affect the two main components of EU action capability: autonomy in goal formation and control of relevant governance resources [...] It is thus of secondary importance whether the EU is repre-

sented internationally by the Commission, the Council Presidency or any other agent because all EU representatives alike are bound to pursue EU preferences that have been shaped according to EU procedures (Gehring et al. (2013), p. 853; for a similar view, see Kaczyński (2010), p. 6).

In foreign policy, as in other fields, the EU's ability to be visible and active depends on its action capability, which leads external partners to acknowledge it as a relevant actor, and not on its representation.

The idea that we should focus on the actions the EU actually takes rather than on it having a single voice is strongly supported by Hartmut Mayer (2013) in a recent analysis of the challenge of coherence in EU foreign policy (see also Mayer (2008)). In the single-voice narrative, Mayer identifies a 'self-inflicted rhetorical trap' (Mayer, 2013, p. 106).

Actually, recent history has shown that EU member states can lead effective civilian action even if such action is not supported by all the member states. David Cadier (2011) showed that the EULEX mission in Kosovo was rather successful in spite of the lack of unanimity between member states. The reluctance of some member states to commit to external operations does not prevent successful action by the coalition of the willing – as shown, for instance, by the Italy-led Alba operation (Zielonka, 2008, pp. 66–67). *Directoires* of a few member states can help to overcome the problem of unitary action, as the EU-3's dealing with Iran showed (Delcourt and Remacle, 2009, p. 251).

External representation of the EU in practice

The disillusionment

This section focuses on formal representation by analyzing the two new functions introduced by the Lisbon Treaty: a European Council president and a high representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security policy. It considers the implementation of these reforms and focuses on the reasons why they have generally been perceived as failures: do these failures imply that stronger EU representation in foreign policy on the world stage – that is, a more legitimate, more charismatic and more powerful EU representative – is needed? Actually, the public disenchantment that followed the appointments of Catherine Ashton as high representative and Herman Van Rompuy as president of the European Council should not be viewed as the result of their so-called incompetence, lack of charisma or other individual shortcomings, a diagnosis that would necessitate the appointment of different leaders. The problem is not one of personalities, but the inadequate assumption that the EU

should be charismatically embodied or personified in order to play an active role on the world stage.

The reforms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty regarding the representation of the EU in foreign policy were supposed to confer more coherence to the position of the EU in this field. Instead, as Smith (2013) notes, they introduced even more confusion, first of all because the Treaty does not stipulate clearly who, among the high representative / vice president, president of the Council and president of the Commission, is responsible for each aspect of the EU's external representation.⁴ While this reform aimed in part at allowing the EU to speak with a single voice, strangely it has led it to institutionalizing three potential speakers.

As for the reform's implementation, one needs only allude to the criticisms that it triggered. Accounts of Ashton and Van Rompuy's early tenure suggest that their first months in office were met with general disappointment. Journalists and public actors have tended to focus excessively on the personalities of these actors, lambasting their so-called incompetence or lack of charisma. It is often argued, moreover, that they lack visibility and that they have failed to represent the EU on the world stage. What is striking is that political actors from the different sides,⁵ Brussels practitioners and journalists all harshly criticized the two representatives, sometimes even before they had time to settle into their functions (see Juncos and Pomorska (2013) and Quatremer (2009)), while even academic literature criticized the work done by Ashton (see, for instance, Smith (2013a, 2013b) and Howorth (2011)). It is certainly rare that scholarly articles dwell on the incompetence of specific individuals. How are we to interpret the disenchantment that followed such much-expected reform?

The reasons for the disillusionment

This disillusionment might be partly due to the process through which Catherine Ashton and Herman Van Rompuy were selected (for details see Barber (2010) and Howorth (2011)). Both representatives were appointed after a search for compromise, a method that is used frequently in EU institutions. Searching for compromise may be justified when it comes to deciding upon public policies that will have to be implemented across EU member states. But when high-level representatives must be selected, the compromise method is not appropriate because it leads to unsatisfying choices. Furthermore, the designation method lacks the legitimacy that would be provided by a democratic election.

This disillusionment could also be attributed to the way Ashton in particular first tackled her new job, because criticism against Van Rompuy decreased after his first months in office (Barber, 2010). Had another indi-

vidual been appointed instead of Ashton, perhaps the criticism would not have been so harsh. However, on a deeper level, this episode shows that the so-often-wished 'embodiment' of the EU is certainly not a good fit to this political organization, for both structural and conjunctural reasons. One might argue that the unfortunate turmoil surrounding Ashton's performance reveals that a stronger external representation of the EU on the world stage is needed. On the contrary, as the following section will argue, this episode shows that any principle of representation relying on personalization is doomed to fail and will entail counterproductive consequences.

Is stronger representation of the EU on the world stage needed?

One could argue that the selection of a representative lacking charisma – or so-called charisma – by the compromise method, and whom the Treaty of Lisbon has provided with an 'impossible job' (Howorth, 2011, p. 321), could only lead to disappointment and that by fighting the obvious shortcomings of this choice – i.e. by electing a charismatic leader who to perform a more feasible job (that is, one with more power) – one could provide the EU with the external representation it needs to act as a global actor. In other words, the election of an EU president could fulfil the hopes that triggered the Lisbon Treaty reforms. Does the EU need a stronger representative – more charismatic, more legitimate and more powerful?

First of all, as argued in the first section, giving more power to a representative of the EU in foreign policy does not really make sense because any action in this field results from the addition of member states' will, which no one individual could force. Being granted unprecedented functions, Ashton and Van Rompuy had the opportunity to shape their jobs. Apparently, they decided to act as 'secretaries' rather than leaders (Howorth, 2011), at least partly because they lacked the general support from member states that would have allowed them to take bolder initiatives and assert their authority more firmly.

As for the so-called lack of charisma and the weak legitimacy plaguing the compromise method, let us consider for a moment a recurrent idea: that of the election of an EU president. This idea is regularly advanced by politicians (for instance Merkel,⁶ Schäuble,⁷ Blair⁸ and Kosciusko-Morizet⁹), federalists (Gozi, 2014) and scholars (see Hix (2002), for instance), and seems to be popular among EU citizens according to opinion polls (see, for instance, *Le Figaro* (2012)). However, the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty discussed earlier reveals instead that such reform would create new types of problems rather than solve the problem of EU external representation.

One might claim that the compromise method is sub-optimal and that an election would be more legitimate. However, even if the current compromise method presents shortcomings, the democratic election of a president of the EU is undesirable for several reasons. Indeed, turnout for European elections is low and has decreased continuously over the years. One cannot overlook the possibility that voter turnout, even in the context of a European presidential election, would also be low, seriously compromising the legitimacy of an elected president. In these conditions, the usual selection method of compromise between member states might be more legitimate than a 'democratic' election.

Second, even if turnout were high, the democratic election of an EU president would not be desirable for several reasons. In particular, a recent analysis of the French presidential election by Brunet and Le Pillouer (2011) and the general decay of this French institution reveals flaws that would likely appear in the context of a European presidential election in an even more cruel form than in the French context. Notably, the presidential election monopolizes public attention and distracts from real issues. It impoverishes the political debate by leading journalists to interpret the slightest political act in terms of 'will he or she be a candidate?' and to a focus on the features of individuals and small facts rather than on political issues.

Furthermore, a presidential election would feed into the myth of the providential leader, which unavoidably leads to overinflated expectations and disappointment on the part of citizens after the first months of presidential tenure. Given the harsh criticism that followed Ashton and Van Rompuy's early tenures, one can easily imagine how intense the negative reaction against an elected EU president could be. In the EU's case, the risk of disenchantment is especially high given the strong negativity bias of the media when reporting on EU-related topics. Media bashing, already intense under Ashton and Van Rompuy and also increasingly a characteristic of French presidential tenures (see the mandates of Sarkozy and Hollande), would likely worsen.

Clearly, when it comes to reforming EU institutions, any institutional design should aim to reduce possible sources of media bashing of representatives for three major reasons: the media negativity bias mentioned earlier, the prevalence of communication technologies that foment this tendency and the current context of intellectual and social crisis. The sometimes ridiculous but widespread attacks against Ashton and Van Rompuy's lack of charisma show that a principle of representation relying on personalization is inadequate in the EU context. An excessive personalization of EU's representation would have no effect, or could even be hazardous. Let us imagine that a leader considered 'charismatic' had been appointed instead of Van Rompuy and Ashton: would

this have changed the fact that EU foreign policy results from the addition of member states' will and that nobody can overcome their divisions? And let us suppose that a 'charismatic' and powerful president would be elected by EU citizens: the focalization of public and media attention on the (potential) candidates running for the election would jeopardize the public debate – which, it should be said, is finally nascent at the EU level in the context of the crisis. At the other end of the spectrum, if the elected person lacked charisma or was elected after a low turnout, it would lead to harsh public criticism. In both cases, focalization on an individual would be detrimental to the analysis of policy issues at the EU level, where the political debate, rather than individuals, are what really matter.

Lastly, if a presidential election were institutionalized, the nationalisms inherent to the EU would pose a serious hurdle. Even if they exist formally, political parties at the EU level are in reality nearly nonexistent and the political debate is still shaped at the domestic level. In this context, it is very likely that citizens would determine their vote not along political lines but along national lines. This would seriously shake the fragile unity of the EU and could even exacerbate nationalist tendencies.

Conclusions

Contrary to those who argue that the EU should be 'embodied' or should have a 'face' in order to act as a global actor and reduce the democratic deficit, this article has argued that principles of representation relying on personalization and considerations of charisma are inadequate in the EU context and would likely feed populism and nationalism. Expectations about the performance of a single EU representative should be lowered drastically. To be clear, we believe that the EU needs to be externally represented by individuals who are accountable to the European Parliament. However, such representation is desirable only if the representative holds no independent power and serves strictly as a mediator, taking into account the diversity of member states' positions across different political sectors. This function would provide the formal guarantee that one could indeed 'call Europe' and be informed of member states' positions, while avoiding the risks – populism, media bashing or the declaration of a fake 'single voice' that would betray the EU's diversity – inherent to the representation of the EU by an elected president.

The EU does not need stronger representation on the world stage. The fact that external actions led by a few member states were successful even if they were not supported unanimously by the EU allows us to reject as unnecessary the myth of the 'single voice', and to argue in favour of a more modest principle of external representation for the EU. What is important is to clarify the

principles of external EU representation by clarifying which specific EU 'capability' is represented by whom, among the president of the Council, the high representative and the president of the Commission, on the world stage. This necessary clarification does not mean that triple representation should be dropped. This triple representation is preferable in the EU context. More fundamentally, the debate should focus on the EU's capabilities in the field of foreign policy and on the type of actions the EU can lead, rather than on its external representation and perception by external partners. In other words, what the EU does and can do in the field of foreign policy matters much more than what the EU is or seems to be to external partners.

Notes

1. Actually, Kissinger is not sure he ever said this: <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/2012-06-27/kissinger-says-calling-europe-quote-not-likely-his>.
2. For instance, after the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, Dov Lynch (2005) noted that 'at best the EU voice is garbled; at worst, it is not heard at all [...] The Constitutional Treaty would have done a lot. It would have strengthened the Union's foreign policy by creating an EU Minister for Foreign Affairs and a European External Action Service. Bolstered by a dedicated service, the new Minister would have presented a single face to the world and conveyed a single voice for EU foreign policy' (p. 11). The reform was finally adopted but did not seem to have the expected consequences, as the second section shows.
3. 'Ironically, one of van Rompuy's expected functions was to embody the 'single voice' with which the EU might speak to the world' Howorth (2011), p. 313.
4. 'Although the HR is supposed to replace the holder of the rotating EU Presidency as the main driver of CFSP/CSDP affairs (Title V, Art. 18), he/she still must compete with the new position of the President of the European Council, who is charged with ensuring the 'external representation' of the Union on issues concerning the CFSP (Title III, Art. 15 (6)), as well as the Commission President, who still retains considerable authority over most economic-related aspects of EFP and 'ensures the EU's external representation' over non-CFSP foreign affairs matters (Title III, Art. 17). These two 'presidential' EU actors, further, hold a higher diplomatic status relative to the HR (as full members of the European Council); therefore they can easily usurp the HR's authority in day-to-day decision making. They are also charged with ensuring the overall consistency of the EU's external actions and other policies (Title V, Art. 21 (3))' (Smith, 2013, p. 1303).
5. For instance, Franziska Brantner, from the German Green Party, declared after Ashton's hearing: 'her hearing has revealed no clear sense of vision, no initiatives and no plans of her own. We're buying a pig in a poke' (<http://greens-efa-service.org/medialib/mcinfo/pub/en/scc/1424>; see also Chaffin (2011)). Or the shocking verbal attacks on Hermann Van Rompuy made by Nigel Farage: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJHETdxwv8Y>.
6. See Lemaitre (2011).
7. See Die Zeit(2011).
8. See Hall (2012).
9. See Atlantico(2012).

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