

Review - The Domestic Sources of European Foreign Policy

Written by Steven Robinson

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STEVEN ROBINSON, APR 6 2014

The Domestic Sources of European Foreign Policy: Defence and Enlargement

By Omar Serrano

Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013

This study provides some much-welcome empirical evidence to inform our collective understanding of the European Union's developing role as an international actor. Derived from research conducted for the author's Ph.D. thesis, this book is a far-reaching assessment of the domestic motivations which underpin and constrain the external action of the European Union (EU), drawing from two case studies: Member States' attitudes towards EU enlargement (particularly views on Turkey's accession), and the EU's developing European/Common Security and Defence Policy (ESDP/CSDP). The insights of the research are drawn primarily from liberal inter-governmental theory and the quantitative statistical analysis is complemented by qualitative interviews and case study analysis.

Rather than accounting for decision-making at the EU level in terms of being the outcome of grand bargains, the book emphasises the importance of domestic preferences and how these shape and constrain policy decisions at the EU level. This can all too often be assumed to be true; the evidence presented in this study gives credibility to this view, which serves as an explanation as to why we have seen inaction in these policy areas, despite notable shifts towards supra-nationalism in security and defence, and in the central role of the Commission on enlargement policy. The evidence of Member State preferences towards both enlargement and towards security and defence policy clearly demonstrates how domestic preferences impact upon the levels of coherence at the EU level, and that European politicians are sensitive to their electorate (transmitted predominantly through party political structures and responding to the rise of far-right movements in some countries) and subsequently process their interests and negotiating positions accordingly (pp. 122-123).

This can be exemplified in the case of France, where domestic pressures were shown to have a clear impact on government policy towards security missions, even in this traditionally committed and active player in global security. For example, with an election looming, the pattern for this Member State from 2005 to 2007 was for a steady decrease in the number of French personnel deployed to Bosnia, which corresponded with an increase in the government's overall approval rating over the same period (pp. 77-78). With different Member States feeling the pressure of electoral cycles at different times, this has an impact on the longer-term commitment and coherence of the EU to foreign and security issues, and often causes Member States to decide to commit fewer personnel to EU missions or, in the case of the Czech Republic in late 2006, to increase levels of participation in security missions in response to domestic pressures.

Recent events in the Ukraine also give us cause to reflect on the EU's development as a foreign policy actor and whether an arms-length association with countries is an effective way for the EU to show its support for its neighbours. If the Ukraine decides to embark on a path towards European integration, what kind of promises does the EU need to make in return? And, more crucially, can the EU's Member States and supra-national institutions portray a united and welcoming front to Ukraine? Furthermore, and even more crucially, can this be sustained over the decades it will take for Ukraine to become integrated with the EU? The evidence from the case of Turkey would

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suggest that this will be, in practice, very difficult to achieve. In the same way that the issues of Turkish enlargement became a political football in France between Sarkozy and Chirac (p. 114), it might be that the eventual enlargement of the EU to include the Ukraine may prove politically divisive in Member States, not least with the rise of anti-immigration movements, which may, despite current openness to the Ukraine, lead to the EU turning its back on the country and letting its European integration dreams fade. The establishment of the European External Action Service and the office of High Representative for Foreign Affairs, after the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in December 2009, have the potential to allow the EU to speak with one voice in response to crises as they develop (as was the case with the implementation of sanctions against Russia in March 2014). However, such institutional reforms will be doomed to fail in terms of achieving coherence in EU foreign policy, as Serrano argues (p. 118), if Member States are unable to come to agreement and instead allow short-term national interests to prevail and serve to divide the Foreign Affairs Council.

Furthermore, this book seeks to re-examine the assumptions of the Almond-Lippmann consensus, the notion that foreign policy is isolated from domestic politics and voter preferences because of its limited impact on their lives and the volatility of public opinion on foreign affairs matters, and concludes that, in European foreign policy at least, domestic political dynamics do impact upon policy outputs. This is largely due to the stability of domestic preferences with regard to both EU security and enlargement – the close alignment between public preferences and government policies (particularly in Nordic countries) towards stressing a greater civilian dimension to CSDP operations illustrates this clearly. Domestic politics, therefore, clearly matter, and this is further exemplified in the case of the enlargement of the EU, where political elites were initially broadly positive, but electorates at large were deeply hostile, especially to Turkey, and through shifting political allegiances to parties that better reflect their views, the national governments' positions have had to be modified in response (pp. 85-86, 118-119).

The hypotheses formulated by the author contend that economic interests and dependence were (or will be) key determinants in governments' collective support for both EU enlargement and ESDP/CSDP missions. Another key determinant, alongside perceived economic interest, the author argues, is the domestic support base for enlargement to a specific country or a security intervention in a particular region or country. The degree to which governments take on domestic pressures will vary, but the levels of popularity and approval governments enjoy will offer them further manoeuvrability in the EU transnational context. It is argued that electorally secure governments are less responsive to short-term, national political pressures when discussing common EU policies (pp. 27-30).

This perspective on the problem underlines the fact that this book focuses predominantly on liberal intergovernmental explanations, drawing from insights derived from comparative politics. Essentially, Serrano argues that policy-makers reflect on both economic interests and the political context when making policy choices in the EU context, which is not an especially novel argument but, when supported by the evidence presented in this book, it is a compelling one. This allows the author to critique – effectively, in my view – the wide body of literature that overlooks the domestic factors which shape national attitudes towards EU policies (and global politics more generally), and also the many studies that tend to overstate or misrepresent the impact of Europeanisation and neo-functional socialisation effects on national foreign policies. That is not to say that socialisation effects do not shape the context in which these policy-makers frame their choices and determine their interests, but the focus Serrano adopts seems fair, balanced, and appropriate, and the evidence he marshals supports this position. The book contributes to the theoretical debates surrounding EU foreign policy-making by shedding some empirical light on the underlying motivations of Member States, which makes it not only an interesting reference piece, but a useful contribution to the future development of European foreign policy-making theories, as it stresses the continued importance of sovereign states in constructing common EU responses.

This 200-page book is very well organised and accessible, with many graphs and tables. However, readers should be aware that the last paragraph of the conclusion ends on p. 124, meaning that the remainder of the book is made up of a helpful index and an extensive bibliography, but also as many as ten appendices. The contents of these appendices include essential information about data coding for the statistical analysis, but also a useful resource of the political parties, government composition, and preferences of all EU Member States towards the case study issues. While these are helpful additions, they do serve to bulk out what would otherwise be a rather slim volume.

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Overall this is a meticulously well researched study, which is broad in its scope and applicability. The theoretical discussions on the sources of European foreign policy and the nature of the EU's actorness in global politics are advanced, and this book is a worthy contribution to the two-level games literature on European integration. The breadth of the study across 27 EU Member States inevitably leads to accusations of superficiality. However, this is counter-weighted by the evidence, attention to detail, and knowledge the author demonstrates across all these different national debates. The study sought to establish trends across the Member States, but also paid attention to national specificities, and explained and accounted for unexpected findings and outliers well. The complex institutional architecture of EU foreign policy has been addressed (to a degree) with recent reforms. However, it is clear from this book that short-term domestic political factors contribute just as much to inaction or a negative consensus on an issue, and these realities are much more difficult decision-making blockages to overcome in order for the EU to develop into a more effective and coherent voice in foreign affairs.

About the author:

Dr Steven Robinson is a Teaching Fellow in EU Politics at the School of Public Policy of University College London. He completed his doctoral thesis, entitled 'Assessing the Europeanisation of Portuguese Foreign and Security Policy', at Newcastle University in 2013, and his research interests lie in the area of the EU as an international actor, the Common Security and Defence Policy, Portuguese foreign policy and the Europeanisation of national foreign policy-making.