The European External Action Service (EEAS), the New Kid on the Block

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Introduction

In contrast to many of the other institutions discussed in this volume, the creation of a European-level foreign policy administration is of a more recent nature. Coordination of member states’ foreign policy only emerged from the 1970s onwards, in the form of the so-called European Political Cooperation (EPC). Being developed outside the Treaty framework, it was initially steered entirely from the national capitals. The exchange of views and formulation of joint declarations was coordinated by the rotating presidency with a key role for the national ministries of foreign affairs. As the member states tried to move beyond a merely declaratory foreign policy, the need for more permanent bodies increased. The establishment in 1987 of a small foreign policy unit in the Council General Secretariat was the beginning of a slow but ever-increasing Brusselization of the European foreign policy machinery (Allen, 1998). The last but most substantial step in this long and incremental process has been the creation of a European External Action Service (EEAS) in December 2010.

Composed of a central administration in Brussels and more than 130 overseas delegations, the EEAS’ main task consists of supporting the equally new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in her daily work. Since the Treaty itself merely dedicates one paragraph to the new supporting body (Art. 27 (3) TEU), policy makers have been investing much time and energy in developing the rules and procedures underpinning its daily functioning. This process and the early functioning of the service has been covered extensively both in academia and in think tanks (for example, Duke, 2015; Juncos and Pomorska, 2013; Murdoch, 2012; Murdoch et al., 2013; Spence, 2012; Vanhoonacker and Pomorska, 2013). Rather than echoing the questions already covered elsewhere, this contribution will study the EEAS from a distinct organization theoretical perspective, which perceives organizations as information-processing systems geared to the generation of decisions (Jones
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and Baumgartner, 2012; March and Simon, [1958] 1993; Poole, 1978; Sproull and Larkey, 1984; Stinchcombe, 1990; Tushman and Nadler, 1978; Workman et al., 2009). As such, it fits an analysis of the establishment and operations of the EEAS particularly well. Information/intelligence has, of course, always been a key resource for foreign policy making. However, for a long time the EU member states have been very reluctant to delegate information gathering and processing to the European level. In that sense, the establishment of the EEAS, whereby both the Brussels-based branch and the external delegations have autonomous capacities for information gathering and processing, is a watershed, the political aspects of which deserve special attention.

Given the recent character of the EEAS, the main focus will be on the constitutive politics of information – that is, the choices that have been made with regard to the way in which policy-relevant information is accessed, distributed, and processed. Following an introduction into the basic components of an information-processing approach and a historical account of information streams prior to Lisbon, the main sections of this chapter examine the rules and routines that guide information processes in both the Brussels-based branch of the EEAS and the Union delegations.

Analytical framework

The idea of perceiving organizations from an information-processing perspective instead of from a structure-oriented point of view – ‘for which the organizational chart is the ever-present tool’ (Shafritz et al., 2005, 193) – is certainly not new. Basic components of such an approach can be traced back (at least) to Herbert Simon’s doctoral dissertation, published in 1945 as Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization. Even from this book, and then more articulately in March and Simon’s Organizations (1958), the image arises that organizations exist in the form of subsequent episodes of information processing with explicit decisions as transitional events that mark the end of one episode and the beginning of a new one (March and Simon [1958] 1993, 152ff). We adhere to this ‘ontological’ assumption, yet refine it with the help of Niklas Luhmann’s concept of ‘reflexive mechanisms’ and his analytical decomposition of social structure into three dimensions: temporal, substantive, and social (Luhmann, 1985; Luhmann, 2000). Next we seek to accommodate Terry Moe’s repeated plea for a genuine political theory of public bureaucracies – in contrast to a theory of organizations that has its origins in economics as, for example, provided by the currently popular ‘transaction costs’ based Principal/Agent models (see Moe, 1990, 1991) – by introducing the distinction between ‘constitutive politics of information’ and ‘operational politics of information’ (see below). Indeed, as Coulam and Smith complain, ‘what is generally missing is research that