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**Restructuring the Foreign Policy of the EU: Competing Narratives and  
Discourses**

**Abstract**

The study of EU foreign policy has devoted over the last years great emphasis to the conceptualization of the role of the Union as an international actor. This paper critically analyzes two overarching narratives – realist and interpretivist - about the role of the Union as an international actor employing insights from critical theory. By such narratives, it is meant those perspectives that have been developed in scholarship and have sought to answer questions about how the EU behaves in the international system and how it should behave. The method of critical reading implies uncovering the premises on which the international role of the EU was constructed within the two narratives, then underscoring their consequences and juxtaposing them to their founding principles. This endeavor highlights the purpose behind the different types of foreign policy constructed and promoted by the two narratives. Simultaneously, the study

enquires into the shared commitment between the two narratives for the creation of a common foreign and security policy for the EU.

**Key words:** *European Union, foreign policy, critical theory, narrative, realist, interpretive*

In the last two decades the European Union has come to be viewed as a unique international actor (Aggestam 2006; Diez 2007; Forsberg 2009; Hyde-Price 2006, 2008; Leonard 2005; Manners 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010; Orbie 2008; Zielonka 2008; Withman 2006). Simultaneously many have doubted the claim that the EU behaves as a traditional national state in the international system. Different narratives and discourses about the Union's role in the international system have been developed in order to legitimate a specific foreign policy. By narratives and discourses of the Union's role in the international system I am referring to those narratives that have been constructed in scholarship and have tried to answer questions about what the EU is as an international actor and what it should be. As the EU is a top-down project where leaders have constantly sought to implement ideas developed by academia, the realm of foreign policy – being traditionally a top-down policy area – has been highly influenced by scholarly debates. Two main directions have shaped the debate around the foreign policy of the EU: namely one centred on a power based – realist - perspective enquired with a positivist epistemology and a second one that focussed on the Union's uniqueness in the in the international system and that was researched with an interpretive epistemology. Both these perspectives have tried to argue around the idea that the EU may or may not have a traditional foreign policy. At the same time, in both cases, great detail was devoted to developing a normative side to their arguments. Discourses about capabilities, norms values or identities have been put forward in order to show how the EU should develop its foreign policy and what kind of force it should project in its international relations.

The goal of the argument developed here is to critically analyse and try to understand *why* and *how* the overarching directions in the debate around the foreign policy of the European Union have constructed and legitimated different kinds of foreign policy approaches for the Union. The study will engage with insights from critical theory to explore the two narratives and expose the

way their goals differ from their consequences and try to understand why they legitimate specific types of foreign policies for the EU. While both perspectives share a common goal in creating and promoting a unified foreign and security policy for the Union, they differ significantly in regard to the weight they afford to military capabilities or norms and values. A realist perspective acknowledges that in the contemporary international system driven by anarchy, the only way the EU could play an important role would be for it to develop strong military capabilities. This *Realpolitik* view of international relations is contrasted by the interpretive approach of those who promote the idea that the EU is a new type of international actor and must build on its specific characteristics even though it might not achieve significant short-term success (Manners 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010; Merand 2010; Rogers 2009). They recognize that the EU must try to develop a common approach to foreign policy that is not bent on the use of military capabilities, because the consensus on such a decision would be almost impossible to achieve due to the conflicting interests of the member states (Bicchi 2006; Pace 2007; Tocci et al. 2008). From this point of view the EU is a normative actor who promotes and should promote the norms and values that lay at its foundation in its external relations (Manners 2002). This normative desiderate has been embraced by the recent leaderships of the EU only rhetorically. Former EU High representative on the Common Foreign Security Policy of the EU, Javier Solana has underlined the normative scope of the Union: ‘in terms of normative power, I broadly agree: we are one of the most important, if not the most important, normative powers in the world’ (cited in Manners 2008:79).

Considerable amount of criticism has been directed towards the EU from third party states due of the dissonance that exists between its rhetoric and its practical actions. The Union seems to be committed to promoting its norms towards the emancipation and well-being of the world, but at the same time it acts as if it were driven by power politics. For example the Union’s divided responses to the worldwide economic crisis or to the issue of energy security (Casier 2007) have put serious doubt on its normative character. By exploring the narratives about the role of the EU as an international actors the paper , tries simultaneously to understand how these scholarly debates have been translated into practice and to sketch how the foreign policy of the EU functions as a result of these competing narratives.

## **Applying insights from critical theory**

The methodology used in this study relies on insights from critical theory to analyze the ways in which the EU was constructed in scholarship as an international actor. Critical reading or immanent critique is applied in order to identify and understand the nature of the differences between the principles and the goals of a narrative and its consequences. This method has been central to the work of the Frankfurt School (Habermas 1984, 1990; Horkheimer & Adorno 1979; Horkheimer 1995a, 1995b, 1995c), hermeneutics scholars (Heidegger 1962; Sherratt 2006), or critical international relations theorists (Booth 1995; Cox 1981, 2001; Linklater 2001, 2007a, 2007b; Neufeld 1995, 2001; Renneger 2001; Smith 1995; Wyn Jones 2001). The study draws on an earlier version of critical theory attributed mainly to Horkheimer, distinct from the much recent strand developed by Habermas that focuses on a communicative theory and the need to foster open dialogue within society – these distinction are detailed further on, where the endeavor developed here will be situated in the broader area of critical international relations. The framework of critical reading implies exploring the construction of a narrative by analyzing its inherent principles and standards and then tracing the way they unfold into its implications. In this manner the immanent contradictions within a narrative's construction are brought to light (Neufeld 1995). Adorno and Horkheimer (1979) argue that if critical reading is to be efficient it has to start from within. As such, the study will assume the position of each narrative explored because only by doing so will it be possible to understand the goals that lay behind them. The framework of analysis for the realist and interpretive perspectives about the international role of the European Union will entail different stages that will be applied equally to both of them. It begins with presenting the way the narratives are situated into the broader area of the study of international relations. The next step explores their main tenets and principles, simultaneously juxtaposing them to the critics that the proponents of different perspectives have put forward

over the years. The contradictions within the narratives are highlighted by uncovering certain discrepancies between the underlying goals and purposes of each perspective. At the same time, the study teases out the contradictions between the goals and principles outlined earlier and their consequences – the way they have been applied and have influenced the practice of foreign policy within the EU. Discourses from key EU foreign policy actors and brief examples of the Union’s recent international actions and attitudes are conveyed in order to achieve the previous point.

### **The Paradox of applying critical theory to the study of EU foreign policy**

International relations theory scholars who have engaged in applying insights from critical theory have at the same time sought to denaturalize the state as the main point of focus in the international system (Fierke 2001, 2007; McCormack 2010). By analyzing the structure of the modern political order – the system of sovereignty that is taught to have been created by the Peace of Westphalia - they sought to challenge the boundaries of the national state. Being created as a top-down construction, the European Union is in itself a critical project that seeks to transcend the modern conceptualization of the nation state which is bound up by an overarching norm of sovereignty. A critical reading of the EU in all its aspects – be it foreign policy or economic policy – is especially difficult in this case as the Union seems to be the materialization of specific critical narratives that addressed the problems of the *Old Europe* that was characterized by considerable bloodshed. Nonetheless, the EU has been constructed through the transfer of legitimacy and authority from the nation states to a new a centre (Haas 2004). New discourses have elevated and perpetuated the new position of power of this centre, which in the end gave birth to new patterns of domination significantly different from the ones that the EU was set to challenge (Linklater 2007b: 50). It is for this reason among others that a critical reading of the foreign policy of the EU like the one developed in this study is much needed at this point. The narratives devised in this area in order to legitimize different international roles

for the Union have become competing orthodoxies, each trying to impose its principles in a positive manner – although the epistemology of the interpretivist perspectives on the foreign policy of the EU argues that only positivist approach engage in such practices (Manners 2010; Neufeld 1995). They tend to act like ideological constructs that reify a particular set of social, economic and discursive arrangements (Smith 1995).

Another difficulty in applying critical theory to the study of the EU and in particular to its foreign policy pertains also from the Union's character of being constructed as a top-down project. The habermassian focus on undistorted communication comes into direct clash with the nature of the dialogue present within the foreign policy of the Union (Linklater 2007a). Traditionally open dialogue has not been a characteristic of decision making in foreign policy (Holsti 1996). Building a critical reading of the EU's role in international system having in mind the pervasiveness of open dialogue would be an project that transcends the goals of this study as it would have to negate the base of foreign policy decision making – the closed nature of decision making in foreign policy and the exclusivity of the state in this area. Moreover, the development of the EU over the last two decades has been influenced by the lack of democratic legitimacy based on the absence of open dialogue in all of the Union's policy areas. Open dialogue in EU foreign policy can only be constructed when its democratic deficit in other foreign policy areas will be mitigated (Wagner 2007).

## **Realism in the study of EU foreign policy**

Realist perspectives on the role of the European Union as an international actor have put the emphasis on the need of the Union to adapt itself to the structural conditions of the international system (Cooper 2004; Johansson-Nogues 2007; Hyde-Price 2006, 2008). The realist tradition in international relations has posited that the international system is dominated by anarchy which

compels states to seek to increase their security in order to survive and consequently thrive. Two methods have been developed in scholarship for achieving this goal: firstly developing strong military capabilities and secondly constructing military alliances with great powers (Mearsheimer 2001; Van Evera 1999; Walt 1987; Waltz 1979). Scholars acting within a liberal paradigm have acknowledged the realist tenet of anarchy structuring the international system, but have underlined that strong economic ties, and thus interdependence can help a state survive and prosper (Keohane 1984; Moravcsik; Zielonka 2008). These three principles have been applied to portray the way the EU can become a veritable international actor that could influence the behavior of other states (Hyde-Price 2008; Whitman 2006: 33). All these views converge with the idea that the EU must develop military capabilities that can be deployed anywhere in the world. Any major power in the international system must be willing to project its power in order to safeguard its interests. This can be achieved only if the state possesses strong military capabilities to back up its claims (Matlary, 2006)

An emphasis on the need to develop military capabilities may be the overarching theme in realist scholarship but lately the focus has shifted towards one of the foundation of positivist social sciences. Even if realists acknowledge that the EU may be a different type of actor than the national state they still stress that its main goal is to secure its interests in order to survive (Heusgen 2005; Hyde-Price 2006, 2007, 2008 ;Wagner 2005, 2007). Here it is important to point out that the realist narrative of the foreign policy of the EU developed in the last two decades differs significantly from that constructed during the Cold War. The difference stems from the fact that during the Cold War no theory in international relations challenged the fact that states' primary goal is to promote and achieve their security interests; consequently, the debate centered around the method through which interests can be achieved. Balducci (2007: 40) underscores this shift:

Until recently the study of European foreign policy has been dominated by the rationalist paradigm, characterized by the three typical assumptions of (i) a self-interested and rational actor, (ii) exogenously-given interests and (iii) society as a strategic realm where individuals, read states, come together to pursue their predefined interests

With both the ideational and practical expansion of the normative view of the EU, not only the claims about the methods to safeguard different interests and the definition of those interests have been challenged, but also it has been affirmed that the Union might be international actor that most of the times doesn't act out of self-interest (Manners 2002; Sjursen 2006a, 2006b). As such, recent realist scholarship has tried to debunk these claims. From Youngs' (2004) point of view it would be really dangerous for both the Union and for other states to portray the former as a *force for good* because the anarchy international system will constrain them to use these representations of the EU in order to promote their own interests. This idea is developed later as an important critique to the interpretivist perspective on the foreign policy of the EU; but it is worth mentioning that for realists a normative actor can never exist, and if one state claimed it possessed such a character it would act in order to project its own interests as universal (Hyde-Price 2007: 29). Jan Zielonka (2008) has been the proponent of the idea that the Europe Union behaves in this way in its relation with small and weak states, being a contemporary empire that seek to engulf its neighbors<sup>1</sup>. This has found affinity both with the realist claim of the impossibility of a truly normative actor and with the liberal conviction that states can use their economic power to influence weaker actors (Hyde-Price 2007: 29; Moravcsik 1999). Liberals have recently argued that the EU promotes its interests by trying to force other states to adapt its *effective multilateralism* (Rogers 2009: 850). By using this term scholars have meant to highlight the fact that the Union is at the moment policing regional cooperation, recognizing such instances only if they comply with the principles set up by it and only if they accept to sign advantageous partnerships for the EU. Nonetheless, this last point has been inherently linked with the need to develop military capabilities that could back up Europe's *effective multilateralism* (Lucarelli 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Even some proponents of the Europe as a normative power concept have conceded to the idea that the UE is acting at least in its Eastern Neighborhood as an normal realist political actor that seeks to promote its own interests at the expense of others (Gillespie 2004: 4; Johansson-Nogués 2007: 187).

## **Immanent contradiction of realist narratives**

Various contradictions between realist principles and those that have influenced the construction of the European Union can be identified. The realist commitment to the tenet that states are the only actors that matter in the international system comes into direct collision with the fact that the European Union is not a state and more importantly it behaves like one only in a limited number areas. However, realist perspectives stress that in the realm of foreign policy the EU will still act in an intergovernmental manner (Hyde-Price 2006, 2007). Through different bargaining processes states can make different concessions in order to promote their national interests within the EU (Moravcsik 1999). At the same time, many realists acknowledge that the big EU member states can influence the international arena only if they poll their power into the EU in order to transform it into a strong international actor. The contradiction here is very clear as realists considering states as the most important actors in the international system, seem to have conceded to the idea that states have to give up their sovereignty to an overarching actor. This turn can be made only if realists claim that the EU must act like powerful state maximizing its own interests. Thus, challenging the basic principles and goals on which the EU was build.

On the other hand, considering states as the primary actors in the international system has obscured the well being of individuals. Since the end of the Cold War this aspect has been addressed through various policies and theories. They have sought to mitigate what scholarship has tagged as a democratic deficit<sup>2</sup> – namely that the policies of the EU are not grounded into the will of its citizens (Follesdal and Hix 2005; Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002). Simultaneously, the democratic deficit was sustained by the fact that realists due to their epistemological commitment to positivism have taken the interests of institutions for granted. They have reified them, forgetting that the EU was created and exists for the well being of its peoples and not for assuring the smooth functioning of its institutions (Grabbe 2006; Scwellnus 2005). In the area of foreign policy Wagner (2007: 2) has argued that the goal of creating an European military force increases the pressures on the member states to contribute financially, policy which in most cases isn't supported by their citizens. Data from the Eurobarometre confirms his views and shows that

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed discussion of the democratic deficit issues within the EU does not fall within the scope of this paper, which will only touch upon the this phenomena in relations to the foreign policy of the Union.

most European citizens do not favor an EU that spends massively to support military operations throughout the world. Additionally, EU citizens hugely support a foreign policy of the EU that is bent on promoting its norms and values but one which is done without financial involvement<sup>3</sup>.

By conceding part of their sovereignty to the European Union member states have practically vanquished in their mutual relations any sign of the overarching anarchy preached by realism. This behavior of the member states seems to have confirmed Alexander Wendt's (1992) famous idea that 'anarchy is what states make of it'. Interestingly, realists have accepted the fact that within the EU member states have managed to transcend the constraints of anarchy and cooperate for their common good (Hyde Price 2006, 2007; Moravcsik 1999). A major contradiction within the realist contributions to the debate around the foreign policy of the EU suffices when one observes their emphasis on the fact that the EU must consider the international system as being anarchic by nature and not try to change it but adapt to. Translated into practice, this has created deep confusion within the foreign policy of the EU. Rhetorically the EU projects itself as a *force for good* which seeks to promote its values for the emancipation of other peoples (Johansson-Nogués 2007). However, many actions of the EU seem to have been influenced by an anarchistic mindset informed and legitimated by the realist perspectives on the Union's foreign policy. For example, in the aftermath of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the also EU was outspoken in condemning the Russian aggression against an emerging democracy but was keen to strike a deal with Moscow when it found it benefic. It gave up supporting the Georgian government for establishing a good relationship with Moscow that assured benefic energy prices for the big EU states (Leonard and Grant 2008)

Member state behavior in the realm of EU foreign policy challenges another realist tenet linked to the previous: that in an anarchic international system states are prone to compete with each other. However, all realist contribution to the debate have acknowledged that one of the hallmarks of the EU has been the shared goal of all member states of creating a common foreign policy. Nonetheless, realists argue that the EU must view its relations with third party states in a competitive manner. Forsberg (2009) has posited that such a contradiction if translated into practice can determine the EU to revert back to a state of political competition between states for

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<sup>3</sup>Special Eurobarometer 343 on Humanitarian Aid, [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_343\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_343_en.pdf), accessed on 4.08.2010.

the setting of the foreign policy goals, and more importantly, the abandoning of the goal of creating a truly common foreign and security policy.

A criticism that has been developed towards realism is that it mainly is an American social science whose only role was to legitimate and inform the foreign policy of the US (Hoffman 1977). As noted above many of the realist contributions to the debate have sought to legitimate the Union's self interested international actions (Heusgen 2005; Hyde-Price 2006, 2007, 2008; Naumann 2005; Wolf 1999). Moreover, various European leaders that have supported the creation of a military force for the EU have also been keen in spurring realist scholarship on EU foreign policy and then using it to legitimate their initiatives (Merand 2010; Rogers 2009). For example former President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Tony Blair were vocal in advocating the development of a military force. Tony Blair speaking in front of the Royal United Services Institute in 1999 underlined that 'European defence is not about new institutional fixes. It is about new capabilities, both military and diplomatic' (cited in Andréani, et al. 2001: 53).

Realists predict that any actor should behave as an interest maximizer in order to survive in the international system (Hyde-Price 2006, 2007). Within the EU, its member states have learnt how to make compromises and to accommodate their interests constructing deep patterns of solidarity between them (Hass 2004, Manners 2002, Moravcsik 2002). This solidarity became rooted in a number of norms and values that are at the base of the EU: democracy, human rights or rule of law. Externally the EU has directed most of its efforts towards promoting these values in other states around the world. At the same time, a strict condition for the integration of new states into the EU was the acceptance of its values and partial relinquishment of old national interests. This process of transferring the authority in defining national interests from the state to the EU has been the hallmark of recent European integration (Hass 2004; Jacoby 2004; Vachudova 2005). Realists due to their positivist commitment cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that states have given up their divergent national interests in order to pursue common goals within the EU<sup>4</sup>. Instead they have posited that the new foreign policy resulting from the cooperation between member states is bound to be one that only seeks to advance the goals of the EU, acting only when the benefits outweigh the costs (Cooper 2004; Hyde-Price 2006; Whitman 2006). The

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<sup>4</sup> Positivist research focuses on empirical research, in this case refuting the observation that state do cooperate and give their national interests will be almost impossible if one remain fully committed to a realist perspective.

seemingly altruistic promotion of democracy and human rights by the EU is seen here as a way to advance its interests and constrain third party states to behave in its benefit.

The contradiction here is very obvious: while EU member states are constrained to behave altruistically in their foreign policy towards each other, realists propose that the EU is an egoistic actor in the international system and when it promotes its values it does it with a hidden agenda (Hyde Price 2007; Zielonka 2008). Thus, realism offers an efficient back door to EU politicians for legitimating their practical egoistic foreign policy actions when rhetorically they claim to behave as a *force for good*. The European Neighborhood Policy<sup>5</sup> best exemplifies this as the EU has developed it in order to promote democracy and human by its own standards. Many leaders of the countries in question rejected the cooperation with the EU claiming that this would only benefited the latter (Haukkala 200a, 2008b, 2008c). In the face of these responses EU leaders legitimate their foreign policy actions by arguing that they're task is to promote the Union's values in the manner they view as the most appropriate.

Like any positivist project, realist perspectives about the international role of EU act in a hegemonic manner trying to silence and reject any dissident view (Cox 1981; Hyde-Price 2008; Linklater 2001, 2007a, 2007b ; Smith 1995; Withman 2006 ). Realists reject and marginalize any perspective that does not claim that the EU has to use its present economic power - the threat of exclusion from its markets and the promise of future membership ( Hyde-Price 2007: 31) – or develop strong military capabilities in order to become a strong international actor. The pursuit of an ethical or altruistic agenda in the EU's foreign policy is seen here as a failed strategy which can have tragic consequences once put into practice. By portraying interpretive perspectives about the role in international system of the EU as a threat to the vital interests and existence of the Union, realists try to delegitimize and throw to the margins of the academic field all other views. Through this a hegemonic project is set to be constructed which will be successful only when other rival political project are deactivated (Rogers 2009: 852).

Robert Cox (1981) famously articulated the idea that any theory always has a purpose and serves a specific interest. It has been widely debated that realist theories mainly serve and legitimate the interests of powerful states (Cox 2001; Linklater 2001; Neufeld 1995). The case of the realist

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<sup>5</sup> A foreign policy instrument of the EU which was set to promote human rights, democracy and economic development in its neighbor states.

interventions in the debate about the role of the European Union as the international actor doesn't stray too far from this. The foreign policy legitimated and promoted by these theories is in line with the goals and interests of the big member states. France and Great Britain have been outspoken in their support for creating a military force for the EU. On the other hand, most member states have been unwilling in financing such an initiative (Haukkala 2008a). As such, the realist perspectives served to naturalize the claim that the EU needs to deploy hard power – especially military power, which has to back up the Union's economic power- in order for it to influence international events and thus become a strong global actor. At the same time, realist scholarship about the foreign policy of the EU has created a political and academic culture that seeks to prepare Europe for surviving in the competition and uncertainty that characterizes the anarchic international system. Nonetheless, this realist culture was much more prevalent in the field of EU foreign policy during the Cold War, when power politics and bipolar competition characterized most interaction between states (Merand 2010).

### **Interpretivism in the study of EU foreign policy**

In the recent years it has been widely held that the EU is a special type of interactional actor, different from the national state in that it does not always act to promote its own interests but tries to promote an universal set of norms and values- be they human rights, democracy, rule of law, or environmental protection - in its external relations (Aggestam 2006; Diez 2007; Forsberg 2009; Leonard 2005; Manners 2002, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2010; Orbie 2008; Zielonka 2008; Whitman 2006). Such a normative approach often comes into collision with the notions of interest defined by realists. It has been previously outlined that realists argue that the EU in order to become a strong international actor has to pursue its own interests by developing military capabilities and use them in connection with its economic power to influence third party states (Hyde-Price 2008: 7). On the other hand, interpretivists - whose view has been prevalent within

the last decade – shape their analysis of the international role of the EU around the fact that the Union has the duty of globally promoting the norms and the values that construct it and have proven successful for its development. The use of military power is seen by proponents of this perspective as not necessary for promoting the Union’s normative power, although at times military capabilities can reinforce its normative stand when engaging in peacekeeping operations and dealing with threats from terrorist groups (Cooper 2004; Manners 2006). In this case, the power of the EU could not stem from its economic potential or military means but from its ability to persuade others in adopting its norms.

There have also been various interpretive perspectives that diverged from the common idea outlined above. While, all interpretivist views about the foreign policy of the EU stress that the EU is a different kind of international actor because it promotes its norms externally – and it ought to, they do not tend to agree about the manner in which the EU is carrying out its foreign policy. Having close resemblance with realist scholarship on the EU’s foreign policy some interpretivists consider that the EU is promoting its norms in a egoistic fashion only in countries which are too weak to resist it or where other strong states don’t have close interests (Johansson-Nogués 2007; Tocci et al. 2008). Various actions and behaviors of the EU have been put forward in order to support this idea: for example the EU has been very critical and outspoken about the quality of the protection of human rights in the countries that were candidates to become member states but remained silent in the front more massive human rights violations within Tibet due to its close economic ties with China (Emerson 2001, 2006; Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig and Knobel 2003).

Nonetheless, this view has only been peripheral to the main argument of interpretivists, that the EU is not only promoting its norms but it does it in a normative manner. Examples like the one presented above exist because the EU is not to be judged by *what it does but by what it is* (Manners 2002), namely the norms and the values that are at its core and are found throughout its founding and subsequent treaties. Thus, the EU possesses a normative construction that predisposes it to act in a normative way (Manners 2008). Persuading others to live by its example becomes the main strategy of the EU, which can be understood here as ideological power with an ability to shape the universal conception of what is normal in the international system (Forsberg 2009; Haukkala 2008b, 2008c).

## **Immanent contradiction of interpretive narratives**

Any critical reading of the interpretivist narratives about the international role of the EU should start by analyzing their foundation that the Union is a special type of international actor that seeks to altruistically promote its norms throughout the world. The analysis starts by uncovering the premises on which the EU is taught off as a normative actor, then highlighting their consequences and juxtaposing them to its founding principles. The previous sections explored the premises of idea that the EU behaves in its international relations as a normative actor. Simultaneously it was underlined that interpretivists share the belief that the EU is biased towards acting normatively but differ in regards to methods and the interests that drive this behavior. An important premise of interpretivist arguments, which was not considered earlier due its only indirect influences, is the pervasiveness of the idea that the EU is the first state or international actor that has behaved normatively or made exporting its norms and values a main foreign policy priority. Positioning the European Union as a unique project both practically and intellectually because it seeks to transcend the boundaries of traditional power based politics is a strategy that has the effect of transforming Union into a universal *force for good*. Its universal character grants the EU considerable powers in creating standards and norms in the international system that no other actor is legitimate enough to challenge. Consequently, the EU discriminates and collaborates only with the states that accept to adapt to the definitions of international normality set out by it (Sjursen and Smith 2004).

The argument that the Union is a unique international actor branches into other critiques of the EU's endeavor to position itself as an emancipatory power whose goal is to promote a series of universal principles that at the same time are found at its base. Firstly, other states or empires have been driven in their foreign policy by the same goals as the EU. The Roman Empire sought to promote its norms and values everywhere it expanded and to all peoples it came into contact (Lynch 2003). Great Britain during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century believed that it had a duty in sharing its civilizing power with all the nations and peoples within its Empire. Its initiative against slavery at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century can be considered a trademark of the pursuit of a normative foreign policy. During the last century, the United States embodied such normative behavior, projecting itself as the defender of the free world - where human rights and democracy are

upheld-, the spreader of democracy or the crusader against *evil* regimes and international terrorism. In all the three cases presented above there was a hidden agenda that governed the adoption of a normative foreign policy. The Romans were animated by the idea of creating a functioning empire that could work for the benefit of the center. For this they needed to impose their norms over others, thus creating the patterns for predicable behavior that could foster the growth of an empire (Mearsheimer 2001). In the case of Great Britain and the United States it has been argued that specific domestic interests groups found in their benefit to push for a normative foreign policy (Selden 2010). The existence of such hidden agendas, whose influence is at least debatable if one shies away from a Marxist perspective, determined the failure of the emancipation inherent in the norms that were exported (democracy, human rights or citizenship). As interpretivists rarely take note of these normative failures (Eriksen 2006), it is worth pointing to the idea that this overlooking might legitimate the present practical behavior of the EU: the discrepancy between its highly emancipatory discourse and its practical actions that seem to build on a realist understanding of world politics<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, it can be added that the United States as the EU is continuously claiming that it has a missionary zeal (Diez 2005: 623). In this sense the idea that the EU always was and will be a normative power becomes weak due to the failure of the same American narrative (Selden 2010).

In its relations with third party states, the EU has tried to define what universal norms are and how they should be globally adopted. Interpretivists have emphasized that the EU is predisposed to promote only the norms that can be used to achieve normative purposes because it is constrained by its politico-legal constitution to behave in such a way. The fact that the EU is build upon a series of treaties which are founded themselves on a number of norms values and principles certifies the duty of the Union to promote them globally. Intense scrutiny was developed in scholarship towards the way the EU tends to define what regional cooperation means. A normative Europe Union does not recognize regional cooperation initiatives if they do not fall into the categories imposed by it. Interpretivists have supported such behavior from the EU, positing that regional cooperation initiatives have to be supported by the EU only if they are compatible:

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<sup>6</sup> In the previous chapter it was highlighted that during the Russian –Georgian war of 2008 and the recent economic crisis the EU's behavior was characterized by the pursuit of its self interest.

Both with regard to what is required for the Union itself in order to be a self-sustainable and well-functioning democratic entity and with regard to the support and further development of similar regional associations in the rest of the world (Eriksen 2006: 253).

Even if one is to accept Manners' (2002, 2006) argument that the EU is biased towards normativity due to the norms that infuse its founding treaties which constrain it to behave according to its norms and promote them, this does not mean that the Union will relinquish its own interests for the emancipation of third party states. Diez (2005: 634) argues that the construction of the self-image of normative power Europe does not come from nowhere and it is not new. It is informed by a deep tradition of initiatives and endeavors that desired to construct world peace (Linklater 2001) or even a world state (Wendt 1999). The normative discourse is used in the case of the EU as a way of distinguishing it from the other (Hopf 2008: 39). The EU positions itself as a unique international actor that has its main goal and duty in promoting its norms for the emancipation of other states and peoples. Immediately such rhetoric encompasses the idea that other states are inferior in their foreign policy, because unlike the EU they do not share this goal of promoting universal norms and trying to act as emancipatory powers. In interpretivist scholarship this move is legitimized by the idea that the EU went through a massive normative transformation. If before the Second World War, Europe was a continent plagued with wars and conflicts, after 1945 the EU managed to create a new discourse and identity based on solidarity between its states and nations, and on the respect of democracy and human rights. The past of the EU becomes the absolute other in the construction of the normative Europe narrative<sup>7</sup> – *the past as other* (Diez 2005: 634). Consequently, all non-EU states are judged according to the past image of Europe and in most cases – the US, or Australia or Canada seem not to fit within this discourse - they are deemed to behave similarly or even less normative. As such, the EU has a duty to promote - even impose - its norms in the states who still act as Europe did before 1945 (Cooper 2004). This means that actors who are geographically separated by the EU are considered in the same way as Europe views itself in the past. In this sense, the enlargement of

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<sup>7</sup> I disagree here with Diez (2005), who critiquing the discourse of the normative power Europe discourse posits that it is not aware of its own biases and traditions, making it less reflexive. My view is that a normative Europe could not be constructed without separating it from the pre-1945 Europe. Only by acknowledging its past can Europe become normative and all narratives that promote this can become reflexive.

the EU is a very striking case, as states from the European continent were considered not to share norms such as democracy or human rights, but their accession to the EU immediately certified the strong presence of such norms within countries like Romania, Bulgaria or Hungary (Jacoby 2004; Scwellnus 2005; Vachudova 2005).

On the other hand, interpretivist scholarship has considered the enlargement policy the most effective normative tool of the EU (Ganzle 2008; Manners 2002, 2010; Sjørusen 2006b). Rhetorically and formally – in EU documents and political declarations- the expansion of the EU was presented as a success in exporting the EU's norms and values to other states. The last enlargement was plagued by many shortcomings, but for the sake of the argument developed here it is worth mentioning only two. While interpretivists argue that the enlargement policy was the most effective instrument of a normative behavior, they seem to overlook that its success was determined by the use of political conditionality. In EU scholarship, conditionality is considered a system of incentives and punishments the Union has managed to exert a high degree of influence over the acceding countries (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004). It not only capacitates the energies of the candidate countries, but it also requires a high degree of internal agreement over the norms and values that the European Union seeks to externalize. As such, the mechanism of conditionality is more in terms with a realist prediction because it rests on the EU's immense economic power. The most important and effective normative instrument of the EU is at the same time one that functions according to realist tenets that predict intense competition between states under anarchy – in this case the EU is backing up conditionality by appealing to its economic power (Haukkala 2008c). The contradiction underlined continuously in this paper between the normative rhetoric of the EU and its actions that tend to be driven by power and self-interests is also instantiated by the way conditionality is portrayed and practiced. Interpretivists portray it as a normative success keeping a blind eye to its mechanisms which are far from being influenced by an emancipatory purpose. Through this the confusion between the goals of the EU and its actions is maintained, legitimized and perpetuated by interpretivist narratives about the role of the Union in the international system. A last point is worth mentioning here in relation to the way interpretivist scholarship has viewed the use conditionality. It was highlighted above that the success of conditionality relies on the development of an internal agreement over the need to adopt the norms of the EU. Vachudova (2005) has shown that in many cases, interpretivists have hailed the successes of conditionality

overlooking the fact that its achievements were resting only on the formal adoption of some policies and changes in national constitutions. It was hoped that once all formal aspects of normative policy will be set up in the acceding and partner states – where conditionality was applied- the contagion with norms, values and ideas will follow (Eriksen 2006; Manners 2002). The effects of such thinking proved to be very damaging for the emancipatory goal of interpretivist narratives, for the leaders of third party states have sought to legitimate various domestic injustices by claiming that the EU's conditionality was forcing them to act in such a way<sup>8</sup>. By keeping a blind eye to the leaders' sometimes even unlawful policies, the EU did not act as *force for good*, but its behavior contributed to the worsening of the standards of life of most citizens living in countries affected by conditionality. Interpretivist scholarship accepted and overlooked these side effects hoping that in the long run the norms of the EU will settle and create the seeds for the emancipation of the individuals living in those countries<sup>9</sup>.

Knud Erik Jørgensen and Katie Laatikainen weary about the interpretivist view that the EU behaves as a normative actor have observed that the EU's actions and discourses are characterized by a 'curious blindness to its own interests' (Jørgensen and Laatikainen 2004: 15). Interpretivist scholarship seems to legitimize any methods of promoting norms by claiming that once set in they will create the seeds for emancipation. In this perspective, a normative EU is no more an altruistic actor, but always seeks to advance its self-interest, that of exporting its norms and granting them universality. By persuading other states to adapt its norms the EU is also transforming its self-interests into common altruistic ones. Consequently, the policies of the countries in question are shaped in order to serve the EU's initial self interest that of promoting its norms – one example of this was analyzed earlier, namely the way the EU seeks to define what regional cooperation means.

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<sup>8</sup> Just to point to one pervasive effect of this kind, almost all the leaders of the post-communist countries from Central and Eastern Europe supported the privatization of state companies on meager sums, which ended up in benefiting specific interest groups in each country. They justified their policy by arguing in front of their citizens that the EU imposed such measures as a condition for their reintegration into Europe (Grabbe 2006).

<sup>9</sup> In terms of minority protection and respect for human rights the EU seems to have been very successful in exporting its norms in the countries where it used conditionality (Jacoby 2004). On the other hand, in recent years there have been serious setbacks relating to implementation of democracy, rule of law or the principle of equality (Hill 2002).

## Conclusion

In the background of the latest external actions of the EU that seem to be informed by its self-interests – the last enlargement, the Russian-Georgian War, the EU's response to the global economic crisis, or the creation of the External Action Service- , the purpose of this study was to critically analyze the realist and interpretivist narratives about the role of the Union as an international actor. By such narratives, I meant those perspectives that have been developed in scholarship and have sought to answer questions about how the EU behaves in the international system and how it should behave. The study engaged in developing a critical reading of the two perspectives outlined above. The method of critical reading has implied uncovering the premises on which the international role of the EU was constructed within the two narratives, then highlighting their consequences and juxtaposing them to their founding principles. It was underscored that both realist and interpretivist perspectives through their portrayal of the international role of the EU have instantiated the dissonance between its rhetoric and its practical foreign policy actions. Various EU leaders have sought to legitimize their foreign policy actions by appealing to these narratives. Realist narratives have centered on the idea that the EU has to promote its self interests in order to survive and thrive in the international system. This theoretical commitment has challenged many of the basic principles on which the European Union was build: solidarity, respect for human right or democracy. The critical reading of realist narratives has highlighted that they act in a totalitarian manner, trying to silence all other perspectives deeming that they could put the mere existence of the EU at risk. Interpretivist perspectives have used the same argument – trying to marginalize realist interventions, claiming that the emancipatory purpose of the EU as a critical project is hampered by the realist idea that the Union should only promote its self-interest in order to survive and to grow at the expense of others. Nonetheless, it was observed that in some cases interpretivists have acknowledged that the EU must act in a power politics manner in order to promote its norms, because once settled they will create the seeds for emancipations. Additionally, interpretivist studies have constructed various causal narratives – that are more in line with a positivist epistemology- to back up their claims about the EU's normative power. In this context, the contradictions between the two narratives, and those that are found within them have created and instantiated the dissonance

between the EU's normative rhetoric and its practical realist actions. In turn, this paints a grim picture for those who support EU practical actions as an expression of its normative role in the international system (Barbe and Johansson-Nogues 2008).

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