

The role of the European Union on the world stage

Abstract

My interest in European Union's external action has shifted over time from the particular analysis of the different agreements concluded by the European Community with several countries all over the world to engaging in a more general attempt to answer the following question: What is the role of the European Union on the world stage?

Conceiving of the European Union as an international actor, reference has to be made to three of its features, which prove to be very useful in understanding the difficulties we can encounter when it comes to fit the European Union into the traditional taxonomy of international actors. These features are: dynamism, uniqueness and autonomy.

In this paper, the European Union is analyzed within the context of a more general phenomenon, which is the emergence of new and powerful actors capable both to counterbalance the power of the most powerful States, and to put into question the States monopoly in regard to the creation of international rules. It is sustained here that the European Union has the authority (legal means to act) to bring about a good evolution of the international legal order. And that it can propel a subtle -already ongoing - process consisting of an internalization of basic international law rules (constitutional rules embodying basic principles – *ius cogens* –) by all the components of the international society, including new actors such as individuals and NGOs. Through statements, proclamations and implementing actions reflective of these basic international rules, the European Union is simultaneously shaping and projecting its identity as well as contributing to this internalization process in a way that when a European Union's breach of these basic international rules takes place, it might be perceived as a betrayal to its own identity.

Considered as a supranational regional process the European Union projects itself with these characteristics: openness (including geographical expansion as well as relations with other countries: inclusiveness); multidimensionality (developed internally and externally); multilateralism supporter and solidarity-oriented. Each of these dimensions is briefly analyzed in this work.

The description of the objectives of the European Union's external action is particularly enlightening in regard to the definition of the role of the EU on the world scene. Here, an overarching objective can be identified: development cooperation, which is contemplated in all its dimensions. Other objectives are: promotion of human rights, democracy and rule of law, promotion of regionalism and management of crisis. With regard to the latter the progress accomplished lately might be conceived of as an expression of the States' interest for regaining some control over the external action of the European Union by bringing the external relations developed under the umbrella of the supranational pillar closer to the intergovernmental pillar. It is suggested here that this move could end up harming the legitimacy of the European Union and covering up the achievements made within the supranational pillar, where the *added value* of the European Union's external action can be basically found.

European Union is engaged in the search for increased legitimacy and recognition and within this context its external action is gaining more and more relevance. This paper analyzes this evolution with the result of leaving more open questions than answers. At least my hope is to inspire some debate on the different points addressed.

