New Directions in EU Foreign Policy Governance: Cross-loading, Leadership and Informal Groupings*

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Abstract

This article explores new patterns of interaction in foreign affairs among European Union (EU) Member States post-Lisbon, which have increased reliance on horizontal and informal practices. It argues that cross-loading among Member States outside EU institutions has moved centre stage and contributed to smaller groups of like-minded Member States working together. This shift challenges much of our understanding of Europeanization, which is based on vertical forms of uploading and downloading. We illustrate these dynamics using the case of Sweden's recognition of Palestine in October 2014. While this seemed to break away from the established EU consensus, Sweden's decision aimed at leading the way and imparting momentum, especially within the like-minded group of EU countries. Rather than being an example of de-Europeanization, this case shows how Member States can seek new ways of exerting influence in the post-Lisbon environment.

Keywords: foreign policy; leadership; Europeanization; Sweden; informal governance

Introduction

This article provides a theoretical explanation of the new and distinctive patterns of interaction in foreign affairs among European Union (EU) Member States that have become more prominent post-Lisbon. It argues that the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in the context of a fragmenting consensus has led to an increase in Member States' reliance on informal practices; namely, cross-loading and small groupings of likeminded countries. As a result, the EU foreign policy system is morphing into a much more complex field, consisting not only of the EU and Member States but also of subsets of Member States working together. This shift challenges much of our established understanding of Europeanization. The most scrutinized dimensions of Europeanization have been the vertical forms of uploading and downloading through which Member States aim to project their preference at the EU level or adapt their national policies to inputs coming from the EU level. We argue instead that horizontal and informal practices of cross-loading should now be the key analytical focus for capturing current transformations theoretically. Cross-loading, defined as the mutual influence among Member States independent of mediation by EU actors (Major, 2005; Tonra, 2015; Wong and Hill, 2011a) has become of primary importance in strengthening like-minded groups, defined as informal ad hoc coalitions of self-selected, able and willing Member States.

Our starting point here is that the gap between formal institutions and informal prac-
tices – which has always existed to varying degrees – has significantly increased as rule
contestation has gained more prominence in global politics. In the case of the EU, these
developments have become entangled with a number of crises and the implementation
of the Lisbon Treaty, with divergent outcomes. While the crisis in the euro area has un-
equivocally led to more integration, in the form of more institutional arrangements that
were swiftly put into place in order to avert collapse (Ioannou *et al.*, 2015), crises in ex-
ternal relations have produced a more ambiguous result (see Müller, 2016). The Arab
Spring and its aftermath, the Ukrainian crisis and the migration crisis of 2015, have not
led to significant new integration, and where it has emerged, as in the proposal for perma-
nent structured cooperation on security and defence, it has still to prove its value. Never-
theless, important changes have occurred behind the scenes in the ways in which Member
States cooperate as a group and among themselves. In its international relations, Europe
has therefore changed, but not in the way envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty that sought
to centralize formal policy-making in Brussels.

We provide a theoretical explanation of this type of change in European foreign affairs,
arguing that the relevance of cross-loading has increased, which in turn has enhanced the
role of like-minded groupings. The analytical centre stage should thus go to changing
patterns of interaction across Member States, as opposed to practices of downloading (ad-
aptation) or uploading (projection). We thus advance a theoretical analysis that suggests
that a new foreign policy governance system has emerged that is based less on the vertical
dimension of Europeanization and more on a horizontal and informal pattern of cross-
loading, which can accommodate contestation and unilateral actions while remaining em-
bedded in a European multilateral order. In fact, current developments may signify the
rescue of Europe by Member States, thus turning Milward's original argument on its head
(Milward, 1992).

In this article, we analyse cross-loading and the leadership dynamics it relies on, as
well as the groupings it contributes to generate. We illustrate these three dynamics with
the unilateral decision by Sweden to recognize Palestine in October 2014. The decision
was justified as 'leading the way' on a key dimension of the Arab–Israeli conflict
(Wallström, 2014). While it circumvented formal EU institutions, Sweden sought to
strengthen its position and influence among like-minded Member States amid a
fragmenting consensus within the EU as a whole. Sweden is a particularly interesting
case study given that it has in the past been considered an influential player in the Com-
mon Foreign and Security Policy – at times even being regarded as a leader despite its
small size.[1]

The article proceeds in two steps. The first part develops the analytical framework and
defines the key concepts of cross-loading, leadership and informal groupings that form
part of the dynamics we call the informal side of Europeanization. The second part exam-
ines the case of Sweden's unilateral decision to recognize Palestine, which we conceive of
as an attempt at cross-loading rather than a case of the de-Europeanization of foreign
policy.

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[1]According to the scorecards of the European Council for Foreign Relations. Available online at: http://www.ecfr.eu/
scorecard.

I. The Informal Side of Europeanization

The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty could have been an exemplary case of European integration followed by Europeanization. It certainly engendered the most significant set of institutional innovations in EU foreign policy; namely, the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the double-hatted position of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP), as well as the abolition of the rotating national presidency. The Lisbon Treaty thus aspired to unleash a new actor onto the world stage and Member States were expected not only to contribute personnel to the EEAS but also to follow its lead in the Council's hierarchy. The overarching goal was consistency between the different areas of the EU external action, as well as between the EU and Member States.[2] This was meant to crown decades of cooperation, which had created an 'automatic reflex of consultation' between Member States (Nuttall, 1992), while strengthening the concentration of the EU foreign policy-making process in Brussels and away from Member States' capitals (Allen, 1998).

However, the story is more complex. The new set of rules led to a number of controversies and differing expectations. The EEAS emerged as an 'interstitial organization' that 'increased [the] heterogeneity of established organizational fields' (Bátora, 2013, p. 599). It met resistance from Member States because it has been impinging on their symbolic and material diplomatic resources (Adler-Nissen, 2014) and Member States in turn have fought to control the EEAS or key components (such as the requirements for recruitment into the EEAS of national diplomats). The European Commission too, while permeating the administrative culture of the EEAS, successfully retained key dossiers, such as external trade. This mixture led some scholars to stress that there was an 'integration paradox' that sees EU Member States agreeing to new forms of integration but then resisting the supranational autonomy it entails (Bickerton *et al*., 2015). While the final balance may not yet be in sight, informal and horizontal practices have emerged to complement – but also replace – the formally defined processes.

These developments point to a gap in our knowledge of the informal and horizontal cross-loading practices through which Member States work in foreign affairs. Three aspects of this pattern require attention. First, we need to reconceptualize cross-loading as a process across Member States that does not necessarily involve EU institutions or formal EU policy-making procedures, but is still anchored broadly in EU practices of cooperation. Second, Member States exercise national leadership differently post-Lisbon, as new informal leadership practices by EU Member States have emerged (Aggestam and Johansson, 2017). Third, we argue that small groupings and like-minded countries have become more relevant in organizing interactions among Member States in foreign affairs. We present our case here and delve into the three aspects in the following subsections.

Following the literature on informal groupings, and informal governance more generally (Delreux and Keukeleire, 2017; Kleine, 2013; Stone, 2013), we propose that '[i]n an informal way, a self-selected group of actors (member states, EU institutional actors, or others) can take the lead in EU policy-making towards specific issues based on particular interests' (Justaert and Keukeleire, 2012, p. 445), thus creating a coalition of the willing inside the EU (Elgström, 2017). This marks a change of direction in the literature on the

Europeanization of foreign policy, which has contributed significant insights into the uneven impact of EU membership on the foreign policies of Member States' (Alecu de Flers and Müller, 2012; Tonra, 2015; Wong and Hill, 2011b) but is biased against analysing Member States' behaviour towards each other, which is considered to be the traditional domain of international relations (Sedelmeier, 2012, p. 825). Much of the attention in the past has focused on top-down processes in which Member States 'operate as recipients and bearers of EU external affairs' (Hadfield *et al*., 2017, p. 11) and to the bottom-up process through which Member States aim to upload their preferences to the EU level. In these uploading and downloading dynamics, Member States have been understood to conduct 'all but the most limited foreign policy objectives inside an EU context' (Manners and Whitman, 2000, p. 243). It would be more correct to talk about EU-ization for this set of dynamics that occur strictly between Member States and the EU level (Flockhart, 2010). Most notably, there has been a widespread belief that the outcome of uploading and downloading has been not only more EU-wide action but also less activity on the part of Member States. The Lisbon Treaty and the creation of the EEAS was expected to be a major step in this direction.

Contemporary developments challenge this bias towards vertical dynamics and underlying assumptions of a path-dependent convergence of foreign policy. In the post-Lisbon context, 'Member States are still clearly keen to protect their autonomy and capacity to act on a national basis' (Smith, 2017, p. 641). If the only available analytical frame is a vertical one, then each deviation becomes a case of 'de-Europeanization,' defined as positively attempting to remove any perceived restraints on Member States imposed by EU foreign policy (Hill and Wong, 2011, p. 218). This dichotomous view leads us to an analytical cul-de-sac, which is why we argue in favour of the concept of cross-loading to capture the new interaction patterns among Member States.

Cross-loading and Directional Leadership

Cross-loading can be defined as the mutual influence among Member States independent of mediation by EU actors (Tonra, 2015; Wong and Hill, 2011a). It does not deny the existence of vertical dynamics but aims to expand the field of practices under scrutiny and latch on to a broader literature to capture how Member States 'look sideways' and not just to Brussels in their foreign policy practices. Cross-loading is thus about influence beyond and around EU institutions. Mirroring Major (2005, p. 186), who first called attention to cross-loading in order to capture change within Europe, rather than due to Europe, we propose that meaningful interactions take place around and in parallel to EU-level meetings, as well as within EU institutions. The concept of cross-loading zooms in on the embeddedness of Member States' national foreign policies by highlighting the way they relate not just to EU positions but also to each other. From this perspective, Europe is the frame for change, rather than its origin, or – to put it in practice terms – it is the overarching practice that anchors cooperation practices among smaller groupings of Member States. The mechanisms in this case are less hierarchical and more centred on what can be termed governance by 'facilitated coordination' (Bulmer and Radaelli, 2005).

It is important to distinguish cross-loading from uploading and relate it to diffusion. While uploading assumes socialization and learning within Common Foreign and

Security Policy institutions, these mechanisms are equally at play in the rich texture of contacts that Member States have outside general meetings in Brussels. For most of its history, the European Community and EU has built on the existence of coalitions of states created with the explicit goal of winning a vote in Brussels. Even at times of profound crisis, Member States have balanced their national interests with a shared concern for regrouping so as to address the gaps and weaknesses of the collective system (Hill, 2004, p. 144). However, the extent to which Member States aim to influence other Member States with the exclusive goal of winning the day in the EU is connected to the degree of centrality that the EU has as the arena for discussing foreign affairs in Europe. The cumulative effect of the 2004 enlargement, multiple European crises and the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty have produced several instances where Member States have bypassed joint EU channels. For instance, following the Ukrainian crisis Germany took a leading role in creating the Normandy contact group outside the EU institutional framework, while at a later stage anchoring these negotiations in the EU (Helwig, 2016). The migration crisis of 2015 was resolved in a similar way. The Middle East peace process, which we discuss in more detail below, is another example of this development.

Cross-loading is not synonymous with agreement or positive influence. It is not a one-way street either, in which one Member State off-loads its priorities onto other Member States that passively absorb them. It is a process through which the other Member States also react to such an attempt in creative ways, which include drawing lessons from the experience of other Member States and responding to the leadership claim by a Member State. They may emulate, distance themselves from, or relaunch a practice. They are in a co-constitutive dialogue about appropriate practices, which also includes elements of denial, rejection or transformation, as European cooperation is able to accommodate a degree of contestation.

Moreover, we define leadership as a process in which an actor purposely seeks to influence and guide activities in a group towards collective goals, decisions and desired outcomes (Avery, 2004, p. 22). We understand leadership as a social, relational role between a leader and its followers (Aggestam and Johansson, 2017). In this sense, leadership is an activity that is co-constitutive and only possible if it is perceived as legitimate by the followers. From this standpoint, the Swedish decision to recognize Palestine was not a case of plain re-nationalization or de-Europeanization, but an attempt to impress a specific direction to the debate and get other EU Member States to follow.

European leadership in post-Lisbon EU foreign policy has become more complex. With the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 important formal leadership functions, such as agenda-setting, coordination and representation were moved from the rotating national presidency to the EU HR/VP and the EEAS, shifting the 'power of the chair' (Tallberg, 2010). Aggestam and Johansson (2017) found that European and national diplomats have divergent expectations about leadership in the EU foreign policy system post-Lisbon. While EEAS officials value most their role in agenda-setting and delivering proposals, national diplomats consider external EU representation by the EEAS as paramount. In fact, Member States tend to perceive the HR/VP and the EEAS as ineffective in agenda-setting and chairing of meetings (Aggestam and Johansson, 2017, p. 1214). Importantly, this is why Member States seek new ways to cooperate to keep up a momentum on what they consider key foreign policy dossiers.

Leadership behaviour varies between cases (Parker and Karlsson, 2014) and depends upon situation, context and actors involved. The leadership type most relevant in our case is directional leadership (Malnes, 1995, p. 92), which rests on taking unilateral action and seeking to lead by example (Underdal, 1994, p. 183–5). It is an attempt to move beyond rhetoric and demonstrates a commitment to act on an issue of principle by making the first move. It is often associated with some kind of virtuous leadership with strong moral overtones. As is explored below, this type of directional leadership resonates closely with Sweden's pioneer character (Zannakis, 2013) and its ambition to set a moral example on international policy issues (Lawler, 1997).

Therefore, unilateral action (which is hardly a new development in European foreign affairs) can be anchored in different frames. Some aim at breaking away from the established EU consensus in order to capitalize on the existing opposition, as in the case of Mitterrand's surprise visit to Sarajevo in 1992. Other frames of action are directed at creating a fait accompli to which the ensuing EU discussion will have to adapt, as in the case Germany's recognition of Croatia and Slovenia in 1991. Yet other frames of action target smaller groups of Member States, which are closer to the position expressed and symbolized by the Member States taking the lead. As explored below in our case of Sweden, what may look like breaking away could in fact be a form of seeking to lead the way.

Informal Groupings and Like-mindedness

Beyond the formal EU governance system there exist smaller, informal groupings of Member States (Justaert and Keukeleire, 2012). These networks are not a new phenomenon per se, but their importance has grown as a consequence of EU enlargements and the new policy dynamics unleashed by the Lisbon Treaty. Moreover, different types of groupings exist within the galaxy of networks, in particular informal ad hoc coalitions of self-selected, able and willing Member States – what we here refer to as like-minded groupings. Our aim is to capture the type of soft alliance that has no formal contract, no enforcing mechanisms and no decision-making procedure, but acts as a practice of inclusion and exclusion, knowledge creation, policy diffusion and resource exchange.

The literature on informal groupings in international organizations points to some of their important functions (Prantl, 2005). Beyond the ambition to amplify the participants' collective influence, informal groups can be crucial in solving problems to strengthen the output legitimacy of the institution to which they belong. They can also play a critical role in contributing to incremental change at times of uncertainty when formal institutions have limited flexibility.

An example of informal grouping of like-minded countries is provided by Elgström (2017) in gender and development policy. This group aims at shaping not only the EU but also other Member States' policies in a like-minded direction. Originally based on a nucleus composed of Nordic countries, it is highly informal. The network is fluid but layered, and accepts new members while maintaining a fairly stable core composition. It meets without an agenda. No minutes are taken. Rather than relying on coercive or shaming strategies, it employs positive resources to maintain internal cohesion and attract new members to the group. Beyond influence, the group aims at openly discussing current issues, exchanging information and coordinating tactics. It shows a need for Member States

to have a trusted and safe environment within which to make sense of ongoing developments in international affairs and 'construct knowledge', while developing a common strategy for specific normative goals (Bicchi, 2014).

While the analysis of Member States' informal groupings in EU foreign policy has mainly been driven by the size of individual Member States, this is not the main determinant in informal groupings within the EU, as we show in our case study below. Gegout (2002), for instance, analyses the Quint's role in the Balkans, where the four biggest EU Member States worked together with the USA, taking decisions that affected the other EU members without their participation. Other authors, such as Laatikainen (2003) and Panke (2011), have focused on groupings of smaller Member States. However, their like-mindedness is not just based on strategic material calculations or size but is infused by broadly shared normative ideas and understandings of a specific international issue.

II. Sweden and the Recognition of Palestine

Sweden's decision in 2014 to recognize Palestine and related developments provides us with an illustration of how the dynamics analysed above can unfold. There is a long history of cooperation among Member States on matters related to the Arab–Israeli conflict and, more recently, on the Middle East peace process. Several important landmarks have been agreed, suggesting a widespread, but incomplete Europeanization of the topic. Recognition, however, has always maintained a special status as falling within the exclusive competence of a Member State. What is puzzling about Sweden's decision to recognize Palestine is that it was a unilateral decision with no prior consultation in the EU system. This broke a pattern in Swedish foreign policy since becoming an EU member. We show that, rather than being an instance of de-Europeanization, Sweden broke away from the existing consensus in order to lead the way both in the like-minded group of countries and in the EU. Apart from official documents and speeches, the study draws on original data from semi-structured interviews with senior Swedish and European foreign policy officials and diplomats based in Stockholm and Brussels (see anonymized references).[3] These interviews provide novel insights in understanding the Swedish decision to recognize Palestine and of the dynamics in the like-minded groupings.

Europeanization and Sweden

Swedish foreign policy has undergone a significant process of Europeanization since the early 1990s, shifting away from its role as a neutral, somewhat reluctant supporter of European integration, to one that seeks to be part of the inner core in EU foreign and security policy:

> We want to be a committed and constructive force in European cooperation. Sweden aspires to be at the core of the European Union (former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Carl Bildt, 2012).

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[3]To achieve maximum information and openness from our informants, we guaranteed the confidentiality of the interviewees on the basis of informed consent.

Brommesson (2016) argues that this reorientation of Swedish foreign policy represents a process of 'radical change' that has continued uninterrupted over the last 25 years, despite changing government parties. Below, we distinguish different stages of Europeanization in Swedish foreign policy and contend that the cross-loading dimension has been largely overlooked. While Swedish foreign policy has changed in recent years, this is not a case of re-nationalization or de-Europeanization, but an adjustment to the changing context of policy-making within the EU itself and the broader international environment.

Top-down adaptation marked the beginning of Swedish membership of the EU, when the organizational and working processes in Swedish foreign policy were adjusted to fit the EU multi-governance system (Mörth, 2016). Yet the Europeanization of Swedish foreign policy also involved uploading and the ambition to project influence onto a common EU platform, as routinely asserted in the annual Swedish foreign policy declarations in Parliament. This is why Sweden has put much effort into coalition-building to gain influence (interviews 6 and 8). Examples of successful initiatives uploaded by Sweden to the EU level include the development of the civilian dimension of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy, the adoption of a Northern Dimension of the Common Foreign and Security Policy and the Eastern Partnership initiative. During its EU presidency in 2009, Sweden mobilized EU foreign ministers to issue a joint declaration pointing to Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state (Council of the European Union, 2009), despite strong resistance by Israel.

These vertical processes of Europeanization have proved useful but are no longer straightforward. Despite official support for the Lisbon Treaty, there is nostalgia over the particular intergovernmental dynamics that the rotating national EU presidency brought to EU foreign policy. On some issues where the HR/VP and EEAS have taken the lead, there has been disquiet about the ownership of the process. As a top Swedish diplomat bluntly put it, 'if you are not involved in the process from the start, you feel no loyalty and solidarity' (interview 1). Another senior Swedish diplomat complained of a lack of transparency and a deficit in Member States' involvement in the EU foreign policy-making process (interview 15).

Moreover, while Sweden has shed its doctrine of neutrality, it continues to define itself as a military non-aligned state. This self-definition cultivates a particular historical conception of Swedish statehood and agency in international affairs, which draws on both nationalism and internationalism (Lawler, 1997). While the Swedish government considers the EU platform to be crucial to its foreign policy, there has always been a tension between diplomats with a European outlook and those with a more global perspective. The latter group, often found working on multilateral issues at the UN, favours a more independent Swedish voice on global politics and finds EU membership at times more of a burden than an advantage (interview 5).

As vertical dynamics have become more complex, Swedish foreign policy has branched out in new networks that may best be described as a like-minded process and horizontal Europeanization. The source of change is the realization that it has become increasingly difficult to take common action as EU28. There is also growing disillusionment with the democratic backsliding in some of the new Eastern members, which, from a Swedish perspective, has tainted the image of the EU as an ethical power (interviews 1 and 5).

As shown below, the EU position on, and policy towards, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict illustrates this growing divide among EU Member States. Swedish diplomats say that an 'enormous gap' is emerging, with daily confrontations between different groups of countries, undermining any trust in a common European foreign policy process (interview 15). From a Swedish perspective, the efforts of the HR/VP and EEAS have mainly focused on preserving unity among Member States rather than proactively working towards playing a greater role in the resolution of the conflict. Swedish diplomats describe the EU as 'actively passive' (interviews 1 and 5) and complain that it can be a problem to get the HR/VP to issue timely statements on critical issues (interview 15). They point to the frustrations this has caused among countries that want the EU to move beyond the rhetoric of a two-state solution to add momentum to solving the never-ending Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Europeanization, the Arab–Israeli Conflict and the Recognition of States

The EU position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on recognition is characterized not only by vertical but also by horizontal dynamics. In general terms, foreign policy cooperation on the Arab–Israeli conflict reached a pinnacle over the period 2009–14 and declined thereafter, whereas state recognition (formally a national competence) has been the object of discussion among Member States.

There is a long history of cooperation on the Arab–Israeli conflict in European Political Cooperation and the Common Foreign and Security Policy (Gordon and Pardo, 2015; Müller, 2011; Persson, 2015a). European discussions, based on the two-state solution, are well established, with their own calendar and issue-specific outputs. Over time considerable unity has been forged, particularly during the period 2009–14. The Europeanization trajectory shows significant convergence over the past decades (Musu, 2010). But this consensus started to crumble in 2014, exactly at the time when Sweden recognized Palestine. In the wake of the 2014 Gaza War, many European countries underwent passionate debates around the issue of recognizing Palestine (Bicchi and Voltolini, 2017).

Recognition of states has also undergone (partial) Europeanization, while remaining a divisive matter for EU Member States. International law in this area is unclear or contested, pitting a declaratory school of thought ('states are recognised once they have certain characteristics') against a constitutive one ('states exist once they have been recognised') (Crawford, 2007). This has prompted a long history of consultations among Europeans in order to decide joint criteria, particularly in the context of the violent break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991 (Caplan, 2005). However, disagreements have continued, as the conflict over the recognition of Kosovo illustrates (Ryngaert and Sobrie, 2011). Therefore, while there is an expectation that EU consultations should take place prior to recognition there is no political or legal commitment to follow their outcome. The case of Palestine is further complicated by the fact that Palestine was declared a state in 1988, during the first Intifada. At that point in time, several then non-European Community states recognized it, including Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Romania. Once they joined the EU, however, their commitment to recognition waned, with the partial exception of Cyprus and Malta.

Sweden: Breaking Away in Order to Lead the Way

> In 2009 EU Member States reiterated their readiness to recognise a Palestinian state, when appropriate. We are now ready to lead the way. In view of the difficult situation in the region and in light of the international law analysis, the government sees no reason to delay a Swedish decision further. We hope that this may show others the way forward (Margot Wallström, Minister for Foreign Affairs 2014)

What prompted Sweden to recognize Palestine unilaterally? The new Swedish Foreign Minister, Margot Wallström, informed her EU colleagues of this decision over an informal lunch just prior to a Foreign Affairs Council meeting 10 days before the official announcement. The groundwork to initiate the formal process leading to a decision to recognize Palestine was actually done before the new government assumed formal office. Consultations with European partners were kept strictly at the level of informal party-political contacts (interviews 1 and 6). What was the Swedish government aiming to achieve?

First, the decision must be considered against the background of domestic party politics. Elections in September 2014 led to a change of government, formed by the Social Democratic Party in coalition with the Green party. These parties had made election pledges on their intention to recognize Palestine. The government thus symbolically marked its intention to change the normative orientation in Swedish foreign policy, which in turn was a springboard for Sweden's ambition to gain a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council (interview 1).

A key consideration was also the new government's perception that the EU was actively passive and at risk of becoming marginalized in relation to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (interviews 5 and 15). The HR/VP and EEAS were seen as primarily focused on maintaining the status quo rather than providing a platform for change onto which Swedish initiatives could be uploaded. This had frustrated Swedish diplomats and politicians for some time, even prior to the change of government and contributes to explaining why traditional EU channels of diplomacy were not utilized more fully. Instead, the Swedish government saw itself as representing an avant garde that moved from words to action on a commonly agreed EU position (interviews 1, 2 and 5). In justifying the decision, Swedish diplomats repeatedly referred to declarations in the Foreign Affairs Council and in the European Council stating the EU's preparedness to recognize Palestine, which, however, left it to each individual Member State to do so when they considered it appropriate (interviews 1, 2 and 3). From this perspective, Sweden did not break ranks with the EU, but took the lead in trying to break the impasse and keep the vision of a two-state solution alive:

> [A]s the *first* EU member state, Sweden recently decided to recognise the State of Palestine … it aims to provide a positive injection to the Middle East Peace Process.… I am heartened by the fact that our step is inspiring a renewed debate (Wallström, 2015).

The ambition to lead by setting a virtuous example has a long pedigree in Swedish foreign policy and so has Sweden's long historical engagement in seeking a resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Zannakis (2013) points to Sweden's pioneer character and 'urge to act' as a norm setter on international issues. Others have talked of the belief in Swedish

exceptionalism (Brommesson, 2016; Lawler, 1997). In relation to the specific issue of Palestinian self-determination, Olof Palme, the former Swedish prime minister, was one of the first Western leaders to shake hands publicly with Arafat in 1974. While he was criticized at the time, this was seen by many social democrats as heralding the way forward (interviews 1 and 6). Sweden is also a major donor of Palestinian aid and development assistance. As a consequence, Swedish diplomats have extensive knowledge of the region and a wide and deep network to draw on that informs this conception of its role (interview 15).

On becoming foreign minister, Wallström immediately instructed her officials to start the process of preparing a decision of formally recognizing Palestine in accordance with international law. The main task was given to the Middle East and North Africa unit in the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, as well as a group of international law experts. Notably, there was no attempt to consult outside this small group of people, breaking the domestic norm prescribing cross-party agreement on matters of recognition (interview 4). For the Swedish government, the overriding priority was to justify the decision on the basis of international law, striking a careful balancing act between the two schools of thought on international law – the declaratory and the constitutive. The group of international law experts based their decision on the fact that there is a territory, population and government, although these criteria had to be qualified due to the absence of mutually agreed 'final status' borders (Wallström, 2014). Reference was made to the legal precedents in recognizing Croatia and Kosovo in the 1990s (when full control of a territory was also lacking), as well as to international declarations acknowledging the Palestinians' capacity to self-govern, such as the 2012 UN decision to upgrade Palestine to non-member observer status (interview 2).

Therefore, despite Sweden's political intentions (Eriksson, 2018), its unilateral decision to spearhead recognition of Palestine was not seen as, or intended to be, a break with other EU Member States per se. Instead, given the discussions taking place in different national parliaments around Europe at the time, the Swedish decision was expected to unleash new dynamics ('to stir things up') both in relation to the Middle East peace process and the EU's role within it (interviews 1 and 5). This decision to lead by example epitomizes directional leadership, which is by its very nature less deliberative than other types of leadership, as it rests on the belief that action will inspire followers, emulation and cross-loading dynamics, as defined in this article.

Leadership of What Followership? Polarization in the EU Debate and Like-minded Groups

The positioning of EU Member States on the Arab–Israeli conflict has varied across time. From a very wide gap between their positions in the early 1970s, Member States converged substantially, only to become polarized again from 2014 onwards around two different groups of like-minded countries (Bicchi and Voltolini, 2017). Sweden's decision should be read in this context. Sweden aimed at affecting the regrouping dynamics that was occurring in 2014, by cross-loading its vision for a more active European stance onto the group of like-minded countries to which it belongs (rather than on the EU as a whole). Sweden's decision led to breathing new life into the debate, as well as to an upgrade of

Sweden's role in the group, despite the fact that Israel's reaction deterred further attempts at recognition.

While the traditional divide among Member States tended to pitch German and Dutch reluctance to take a hard line against Israel against the position advocated by France, the new divide that emerged around 2014 saw central and east European countries, together with Cyprus and Greece, at the forefront in Israel's defence. Greece, notably, performed a substantial turnaround, which started with a memorandum of understanding signed in September 2011 (Tziampiris, 2014, p. 114). Energy and security cooperation also brought together Cyprus and Israel from 2011 onwards, creating a 'comfortable quasi-alliance' in the eastern Mediterranean (Tziarras, 2016). In parallel, central and east European countries became more vocal in their support for Israel and downplayed their earlier recognition of Palestine. In 2012, there was an interesting early example of fragmentation in the EU position. Consultations prior to the United Nations General Assembly vote about granting Palestine non-member state status initially led to a joint decision by EU countries to abstain. However, Luxembourg, allegedly acting as a front runner for France, let it be known shortly before the vote that it would vote in favour, breaking the agreed consensus. The Czechs then reacted by voting against, the only EU country to do so (interview 9). At first, this led to a brief period of renewed convergence, when the Czech Republic strove to avoid further isolation. But in 2014 a deeper polarization emerged. Hungary and the Czech Republic expressed their explicit opposition to the EU stance on labelling goods originating from Israeli settlements, while Romania renewed its tradition of close ties with Israel. Therefore, the group of like-minded countries that in 2014 was closer to Israel was paradoxically the one that included most of the countries that had recognized Palestine in the past.

The election of Trump and the United States decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018 further consolidated the identity of this group. The Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania repeatedly blocked the adoption of an EU resolution condemning the United States' embassy's move. The three countries' representatives, together with Austria's, also participated in the ceremonial opening of the new embassy, while Romania's government has expressed the intention to move its embassy to Jerusalem, which would make it the only EU country to do so.

The other end of the political spectrum is populated by another group of like-minded countries, which includes Belgium, France, Ireland and Sweden at the core, while other countries, such as Finland, Slovenia and Spain, have generally gravitated around it. Participation has been fluid, reflecting the dynamic architecture of the network, as in other cases of like-minded groups (Elgström, 2017). At the time of the 2012 UN decision, for instance, EU countries voting in favour also included Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Malta and Portugal, as well as Cyprus and Greece. It is this group in particular that Sweden targeted with its decision to recognize Palestine in October 2014.

Subsequent reactions exemplify two key processes of cross-loading dynamics. First, cross-loading is not a one-way street. Leaders need followers and at first there was no snowballing effect, as hoped by Sweden (see Persson, 2015b). The initial reaction of Sweden's European partners was to distance themselves from the path undertaken by Sweden, largely due to an immediate and vitriolic response by Israel, which went 'far beyond normal diplomatic conduct' to set an example (interviews 1, 7 and 15). Swedish diplomats readily admit that Israel has been highly successful in their campaign to isolate

Sweden on the matter of recognition and to scupper any Swedish ambition to attract followers (interviews 5 and 8). In the wake of Sweden's recognition, the issue of recognition was no longer discussed among EU Member States as a whole (interviews 10, 11 and 12), although Slovenia got close to following Sweden's example before snap elections stopped the process in March 2018

Of equal importance is a second process. This centred on the consolidated position of Sweden amid the group of like-minded countries to which it belongs, especially in relation to the group's informal leader, France. After the Gaza conflict in the summer of 2014, France led a proposal for negotiations with the participation of Germany and the UK. The issue of a peace conference was taken up again by France in 2015 – and again *not* in the context of the EU. Rather, France chose carefully the European partners with which to work, and Sweden was included in the inner group because of its strong relations with Arab countries following the recognition of Palestine (interviews 10 and 13). At the conference in Paris in June 2016, only eight European countries were invited, as well as the HR/VP. Cooperation between France and Sweden continued after the conference, not only in the preparation of the follow-up meeting, which took place in January 2017, but also to coordinate positions in the like-minded group and in EU discussions. In a highly symbolic move, for instance, when the French minister of foreign affairs had to leave a Foreign Affairs Council meeting early, Wallström spoke for him before the meetings concluded (interview 10). Swedish diplomats working on the Middle East peace process describe their relations with their French counterparts as very close, with consultations on a near-daily basis (interview 15).

The extent to which renewed activism in this like-minded group can lead to a new momentum within the EU depends on a number of factors that are largely beyond the control of the group itself. The change in United States leadership has strengthened the 'opposite' like-minded group, which has repeatedly vetoed declarations, contributing to a de facto stalling of dialogue at the EU level. For their part, the like-minded group to which Sweden belongs has become more reluctant to act at the EU level for fear of a deadlock or (worse) of diluting the established EU position. The decline of trust and consensus among the EU28 has been paralleled by an increase in the intensity of informal, horizontal diplomatic relations within groups. 'Phoning the capitals' of like-minded countries is now a regular occurrence to consult and arrange informal meetings to coordinate positions and to put pressure on the HR/VP to respond to a crisis, such as the deathly clashes between Palestinians and Israelis at the Gaza border in May 2018 (interview 15). Consultations now regularly include Germany – a heavyweight and skilful actor on the Middle East peace process (interview 15) – that both groups would like to incorporate. While it is instinctively careful of protecting its special relationship with Israel, Germany's position has shifted towards the middle ground in response to the polarization within the EU and the risk that the whole fabric of collective European Middle East policy, which has taken decades to agree, begins to unravel.

Therefore, Sweden's recognition of Palestine contributed to shake up European equilibria and expanded Sweden's role and international profile, while remaining largely anchored in a European context. Recognition gave Sweden a position and a standing, despite its small size. It bestowed upon Sweden a more central role in the peace process and landed it with invitations to join initiatives, such as the French one (interview 1). Therefore, rather than just a political signal, recognition was meant as a form of political engagement, not only with the dossier, but also and especially with like-minded European

partners working on it. The Swedish decision contributed to polarizing the different groupings within the EU even further, but it also affected the debate in general and strengthened the position of Sweden in one like-minded group (interviews 10 and 14).

Conclusion: The National Rescue of European Foreign Policy?

This article explored the changing interaction patterns among Member States in the EU foreign policy system. Our argument is that – perhaps paradoxically – the Lisbon Treaty has contributed to foregrounding informal and horizontal cooperation practices among Member States; namely, cross-loading dynamics. It is thus no longer possible (if it ever was) to assume that Europeanization occurs purely in the up or down direction, as generally presented in the literature. The uploading processes that signal the intention of Member States to work through EU institutions, as well as the downloading processes marking the adaptation of Member States' national foreign policy to the EU position, need to be analysed alongside more elusive cross-loading practices in which Member States work through horizontal contacts. In this environment, the directional leadership of a single member state can signal a change in the pattern of Member States' cooperation in foreign policy by impacting upon the debate in Europe, the group dynamics of like-minded countries and potentially (but not necessarily) on EU cooperation practices too.

The example of Sweden has illustrated this pattern by examining how Sweden broke away from an established consensus in order to lead the way on the EU Member States' position on the recognition of Palestine. Although Sweden faced severe criticism from Israel, determined to set an example from this, Sweden succeeded not only in enhancing its status within the group of like-minded countries that support a more pro-Palestinian position in the EU foreign policy system, but also in partially setting the terms of the debate, if the international context were to become more favourable to the conflict's resolution.

This has consequences for the analysis of EU foreign policy-making and European integration more generally. It suggests a fragmentation in the institutional scene, but it also points to the emergence of new patterns of interaction that can remain anchored in the EU framework, albeit loosely at times. Abandoning the one-dimensional directionality of Europeanization and separating the agency of EU institutions from Member States' agency does not automatically entail a re-nationalization of foreign policy, de-Europeanization or lack of EEAS agency.

With some provocation, we conclude by suggesting that we may be witnessing a novel development in the way Europe is constructed, in which Member States actually rescue Europe, rather than the other way around. Putting modes of policy action on a linear continuum going from national to European level may work to assess the final degree of EU content in a policy outcome (Hadfield *et al.*, 2017, p. 14). However, the process leading to such an outcome is anything but linear, and a more practice-oriented approach helps in identifying the various ways in which Member States can 'do Europe', including loops and practices that are not directly related to the EU. In fact, we may be witnessing a turnaround. During its first 50 years, the leitmotiv may have been the 'European rescue of national foreign policies,' in which cooperation at the European level has acted as a way of redressing shortcomings in national foreign policies (Allen, 1996; Milward, 1992). The pattern currently emerging may point to the opposite direction, namely the 'national rescue of Europe' – that is, the development of a new set of interactions in which cooperation

among small groups of Member States can help to address shortcomings in the EU foreign policy system. From this perspective, Member States that launch unilateral initiatives and create informal groupings can enhance the EU foreign policy system rather than undermine it, as long as the Member States continue to bring a European mind-set to their actions. If this is the case, the national rescue of European foreign policy may be one of the paradoxical and unexpected outcomes of the Lisbon Treaty.

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