



Diplomacy and audit: Technologies of knowledge in Europe



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates diplomatic knowledge production in Europe—mostly in European Union institutions but also in the member states—to probe the role of audit culture in that professional field. Diplomatic knowledge refers to the knowledge about places that is produced by career diplomats; audit culture refers to a form of regulatory power that shapes thought and action through the continuous application of measurable standards. Empirically, the analysis draws from nearly one hundred interviews with policy professionals, mostly but not exclusively in Brussels, to examine the play of qualitative and intangible skills in diplomatic work. Conceptually, it foregrounds the growing impact of audit in that sphere. I observe the narratives of efficiency, economy, and flexibility in European diplomacy, and I highlight tensions around the value of different forms of knowledge in the profession. By foregrounding the intellectual and creative facets of diplomatic work and by examining the impact of audit culture on the profession, the article helps us understand how diplomats produce knowledge about the world. It thereby enriches geographical scholarship on geopolitical knowledge and policy processes.

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1. Introduction: the skilling of diplomacy

Training today is “hundred percent” different than five years ago, a person knowledgeable about diplomatic training in several European countries remarks at the end of the interview. This is a casual hyperbole, but it points to some noteworthy dynamics in the diplomatic profession there. Several states are revising the structures and modes of diplomatic training.¹ The European Union (EU) is building up its foreign service—the European External Action Service or EEAS—and forging its own transnational diplomatic culture. Today’s fast-paced multilateral diplomacy seems to require skills and efficiencies that were insufficiently cultivated even in recent past. Many of these efficiencies relate to speed: the growing pressure to render tangible outputs fast. The shifts and tensions that arise from that pressure are fundamentally about the terms under which diplomats create knowledge about the world.

Questions about the utility and value of different forms of knowledge come to the fore especially in EU-level diplomacy: both

the Union’s external representation and the intra-EU diplomacy among the member states. This is in part because of the novel and transnational character of the European External Action Service. Although some speculated early on that the member states would not take the service seriously enough to second strong practitioners to it, these predictions did not come to pass. Even the relative skeptics note that the member states take EEAS recruitment “very seriously” and second experienced diplomats to serve there. *The Economist* (2014: 49) justifiably calls the union’s diplomatic service “brainy”. Outside the EEAS, the member states maintain well-staffed representations at the EU: for a number of them, that office is their strongest *de facto* embassy. When both France and Germany appointed top diplomats to serve as their Permanent Representatives to the European Union in June 2014, *The European Voice* (2014) remarked: “Neither Paris nor Berlin thinks that this is any time for novices in Brussels”. It is a time, it appears, for some serious thinking on diplomatic training and representation in Europe.

This paper takes that thinking around diplomatic work as a starting point to probe some fundamental questions about diplomatic knowledge creation in today’s EU: primarily in the union’s institutions but also in the foreign services of the member states. I examine what kinds of knowledge are cultivated in these institutions and what tensions this brings to the fore. I argue that high-quality diplomatic knowledge is in part a creative enterprise that requires intellectual curiosity and imaginative engagement with difference. The empirical claims concentrate on Brussels, but their conceptual implications reach beyond that city. Given

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¹ Each national setting is unique, but substantial and in some cases “enormous” efforts to improve diplomatic representation are nonetheless discernible in multiple places. France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development (2015) established the Diplomatic and Consular Institute in 2010; Poland established the Ignacy Jan Paderewski Polish Institute of Diplomacy (2015) in 2012; the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office launched a Diplomatic Academy in 2014 (Hague, 2014); Hungary’s National University of Public Service (n.d.) launched the Academy of Diplomacy Budapest programme in 2014. There are further, more specific, reviews of diplomatic recruitment, training, and work in several EU member states (see also Berger et al., 2013).

that diplomacy is one of the principal arenas and integrative mechanisms of international politics, daily practice in that profession can tell us a great deal about the processes by which nation-states and other international actors produce geopolitical knowledge about world affairs.

The concept of audit culture at the center of my argument synthesizes insights from sociology, anthropology, and the study of public management. It refers to a technology of government that operates through continuous, standardized, quantitative measurement of complex social relations (cf. Power, 1997; Shore and Wright, 2015; Strathern, 2000a). Audit takes a political practice and renders it auditable in technical terms. As a regulatory process and milieu, audit affects not only social outcomes (e.g. policies adopted) but also, and more fundamentally, the processes of intellectual production and subject-formation that underpin these outcomes. In European diplomacy, then, the tensions are not only about technical matters like financial management or prompt communication. They are also about what counts as valid and useful knowledge in European diplomacy and what kinds of persons ought to excel in that field.

The article draws on a long-term project on diplomatic knowledge production in Europe (Kuus, 2014). Its primary empirical material comes from nearly 100 interviews with over 60 diplomats and foreign policy professionals. These were carried out in small batches in 2007–2015 and are used in a two-layered manner. The quotes in this paper come from 44 interviews conducted with 40 individuals in 2014–15: these interviews focused explicitly on the transformations of diplomatic work today and they function as the top layer of my primary material. That layer rests on well over 100 interviews conducted for another long-term study of diplomatic knowledge in 2013–17. These earlier interviews function as the bottom layer of the primary material: they are not quoted but undergird my argument as the context in which the present enquiry took shape. All interview material is used without disclosing the identities of the speakers. Among the 40 interviewees cited in this paper, the majority are diplomats working either at the EEAS or the EU Council (the intergovernmental setting of intra-EU diplomacy). In order to situate EU institutions in the broader diplomatic field in Europe, I also spoke to a wider circle of persons involved in diplomatic representation and training in five member states and in the relevant training centers and think-tanks.² The article is not about the technical

and administrative set-up of training: I make no detailed claims about the content of courses, for example. I rather use training (as an ongoing social reproduction rather than an on-off procedure of skill acquisition) as a lens through which to examine the long-term transformations of diplomatic knowledge production in Europe. This is reflected in the circle of interviewees. All of my interlocutors participate in diplomatic practice on a daily basis, but most are not involved in the administration of courses or teaching modules. They were interviewed because of their overall, often decades-long, experience in working in or observing diplomacy and EU institutions.

The rest of the article proceeds in five steps. After explaining the conceptual argument in the next section, I lay out my empirical starting point: a set of claims that frame diplomacy as a profession amidst rapid and far-reaching change. I foreground the tropes of efficiency, economy, and flexibility in such claims. The enquiry then turns to the primary material on diplomatic knowledge production in Europe. Looking first at diplomacy in general and then at EU decision-making in particular, I highlight the discrepancy between the normative frame of fast(er) diplomacy and the actual practice of EU diplomacy. The talk of the new, the fast, and the measurable too often misrepresents the skills and dispositions most valuable in Brussels. Those are the intangible kind: careful listening, cultivated discernment, intellectual grasp of complex issues. The discrepancy plays out in the interviews too. On the one hand, I encounter narratives of streamlining, speed, modern management, and 21st-century diplomacy (which the speakers contrast against the so-called 19th-century diplomacy). The interviewees generally accept those narratives as the principal political frame of their work. On the other hand, the measures prescribed by these narratives are widely suspected to jeopardize the quality of diplomatic knowledge. I foreground that tension. The concluding section links the Brussels example to governmentalized regulation of intellectual production so as to highlight the broader empirical and conceptual import of the study.

In interpreting the empirical material, I avoid dichotomous notions of old and new, good and bad, national and supranational. We are looking at a diffuse and contingent contestation around the terms of diplomatic practice (rather than a bipolar competition on a pre-defined battleground). I likewise refrain from simplistic causal explanations in which single institutions or individuals create problems or solve them. The task is to make visible the everyday and often indirect struggles over fundamental political issues in the guise of efficiency, transparency, quality, and creativity.

2. “Behind skills there is a mindset issue”: audit and the diplomatic field

Audit has become a central mode of regulating many spheres of social life, including public management, higher education, and medicine (Power, 1997; Shore and Wright, 2015). It is a transnational and cross-sectional phenomenon that regulates complex social practices through technicalizing them. The term can be both descriptive (what is done) and normative (what is deemed valuable) (Power, 1997: 6). As an instrument of regulation, audit involves testing, evidence-gathering, and measurement. In parallel, it is also “a system of values and goals which are inscribed in the programmes which demand it” (Power, 1997: xiii). As a conceptual tool, audit is best approached not through the lens of content (what it is) but function (what it does). More than a neutral activity of documentation, audit makes activities auditable. It simultaneously creates an institutionally acceptable knowledge base (of auditable activities) and the environment that is receptive to that knowledge base (Power, 1996: 289). Audit creates and requires political subjects who render themselves auditable (Shore and Wright, 2000: 57). It is a technology of power that governs conduct

² The exact number of interviews is 154, each lasting 30–60 min, usually the latter: of those, 44 interviews (with 40 persons) were conducted for the present study and the remaining 110 (not all of them with diplomats) figure as contextual material (Kuus, 2014). The conservative estimate of “nearly hundred” in the text is used to indicate the interviews with career diplomats and to convey the overall range of the primary material. Among the 40 interviewees in 2014–15, most are familiar with more than one diplomatic service and have a working knowledge of further such services in Europe. Most have over twenty years of professional, usually diplomatic, experience. All interviews are non-attributable and off the record; all interviewees speak in a personal capacity. The unattributed quotes in the text are derived from field notes rather than recordings. Due to timely transcription, usually just hours after the interview, the quotes appear in fully or very nearly verbatim form. They are presented in ways that conceal the speakers’ specific institutional location, rank, or nationality. I also avoid references to places outside Brussels: 10 out of the 40 interviewees currently work in national capitals, but given the small numbers of interviews in any one capital (plus other centers of diplomatic training), citing a location could, to a specialist, point to individuals. More importantly, almost all interviewees, who come from 15 EU member states, have extensive transnational experience regardless of their current institutional affiliation: locational references would misrepresent the transnational scope of the remarks. All of my substantive arguments draw on multiple interviews: no string of quotes relies on the same person unless clearly stated in the text. The opinions quoted are often cross-rank in scope: although many of the interviewees are senior diplomats, I quote only the remarks that are credible beyond the high ranks. The marker “he” or “she” does not necessarily identify the speaker’s gender: given the still male-dominated character of diplomacy in the managerial ranks, some women are identified as men (and the other way around) to ensure anonymity. See Kuus, 2014, Ch. 2 for a more detailed explanation of such research methods in the context of diplomatic and quasi-diplomatic institutions.

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