Governance in EU foreign policy: exploring small state influence

Skander Nasra

ABSTRACT  It is often stated that small states are not left much choice other than to accept the authority of large states in European Union (EU) foreign policy. This article argues that they may indeed be small in terms of resources but not necessarily in terms of influence. Conceptualizing EU foreign policy as a system of governance, the article suggests a framework for analysis to explain the extent to which small states may wield influence. The utility of the proposed framework is demonstrated by examining Belgian diplomatic activity in EU foreign policy towards the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

KEY WORDS  Belgium; Democratic Republic of Congo; European Union foreign policy; governance; influence; small states.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades the European Union (EU) has evolved into a global actor that is widely acknowledged to have the potential to be a major force in shaping global events (Bretherton and Vogler 2005; Orbie 2008). Realist scholars (Gégout 2002; Hill 2004) tend to regard EU foreign policy as dominated by large member states, i.e., France, Germany and the United Kingdom, with success primarily dependent on the extent to which they have common interests. The ‘big three’ form a leadership group in this view, precooking decisions that are then formally adopted by all member states. For small states, i.e., states with a limited material resource base, there is not much choice other than to accept the authority of large member states.

Various authors (Arter 2000; Björkdahl 2008; Bunse 2009; Jakobsen 2009; Kronsell 2002; Ojanen 2000; Romsloe 2004; Wivel 2005) have nonetheless argued that under specific conditions small states can successfully pursue their objectives through the EU. To date, Jakobsen (2009: 86–8) has given the most encompassing overview of factors explaining small states’ possibilities of influencing EU foreign policy. He suggests that small states need to have a fore-runner reputation, provide convincing arguments, excel in building coalitions and commit sufficient capabilities to support EU initiatives. Individual scholars place a different emphasis on the importance of all or a number of these factors.

However, two sets of concerns remain inadequately addressed in the small states literature. First, existing studies do not depart from any analytical
framework (except Romsloe [2004]), whereas this may add insights into small states’ possibilities of influencing EU foreign policy. Furthermore, this may not only allow systemizing results of existing and future studies but also to further our understanding of the EU’s foreign policy-making system.

A second concern revolves around the idea that the explanatory variables of policy outcomes depend on the issue at stake. It has been demonstrated that there is neither a single group of actors nor a single resource of power that is strong enough to dominate the policy process across all policy areas (Hofmann and Türk 2006: 575). Yet, small state studies tend to focus on one particular policy area: Finland and the EU’s Northern Dimension Initiative (Arter 2000; Bunse 2009); Sweden in EU environmental policies (Kronsell 2002) and conflict prevention (Björkdahl 2008); and the three Scandinavian countries in the development of European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) (Jakobsen 2009; Ojanen 2000; Romsloe 2004). In order to make generalizations about small state influence, their role should be examined across various areas of EU foreign policy.

This article argues that notwithstanding the valuable insights offered by Realist perspectives and the small states literature, the governance approach complemented with theories of communicative action may add to our understanding of the role of small states in EU foreign policy. In short, the governance approach examines the mechanisms of ‘governing or steering’ not exercised solely by governments in a setting where individual state sovereignty is diluted by collective decision-making. In contrast to realist thinking, it does not a priori favour materially powerful actors, arguing that weaker actors may be as good or even better positioned. The suggested framework rests on three assumptions: (1) the political processes of EU foreign policy are an essential explanatory factor for policy outcomes; (2) the day-to-day functioning of these processes differs analytically from history-making decisions; and (3) the political processes vary across different policy areas (Jachtenfuchs 2001; Jönsson et al. 1998: 321–2).

The influence of small states is defined as the correlation between its preferences and the final outcome of EU policies. Table 1 shows the four categories of influence.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. The first part discusses the key characteristics and implications of the governance approach. Then a framework is suggested to explain the role of small states in EU foreign policy. The second part applies this framework to Belgian diplomatic activity in EU foreign policy towards the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The last section concludes and indicates areas for further research.

FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

The governance approach

EU foreign policy is neither a form of intergovernmental co-operation nor a clear-cut foreign policy comparable to that of nation states. Rather, it entails...
a web of non-hierarchical interconnections across different levels and locations (Collinson 1999). The resulting complexity is mirrored in the lack of a single pattern of foreign policy-making: the different demands of distinct policy areas as well as the varying loci of decision-making have resulted in diverse forms of policy-making. Smith (2006: 301–5) identifies three such forms: (1) traditional Community policy-making that governs communitarized policies; (2) Union policy-making that falls close to the intergovernmental mode of EU policy-making; and (3) ‘negotiated order’. The latter indicates the cases in which the EU’s international activities take place in a multi-level negotiation context. EU foreign policy decisions are not, however, easily divided between these modes of governance: actions are often based on different policy-making regimes, drawing competences and instruments from different levels (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008: 66–7).

It is suggested that conceptualizing EU foreign policy in terms of governance overcomes the analytical difficulties related to the complexity of EU foreign policy-making (Collinson 1999; Filtenborg et al. 2002; Jachtenfuchs 2001). The governance approach conceives EU foreign policy as a policy system in which multiple players co-ordinate their respective activities in a setting characterized by a high degree of interdependence. Given their mutual dependence actors are unable to achieve their objectives without resources possessed by others, assuming that the authority to make, implement and enforce rules is increasingly dispersed among a variety of actors at a variety of levels. The structures of governance are usually associated with the network metaphor, referring to clusters of ‘actors, each of which has an interest, or “stake” in a given … policy sector and the capacity to help determine policy success or failure’ (Peterson and Bomberg 1999: 8). Networks are characterized by a problem-solving style of decision-making in which consensus-seeking tendencies prevail (Börzel 1998: 255–9; Jachtenfuchs 2001: 249–56; Jönsson et al. 1998: 321–6; Smith 2004a: 742–5).

Turning to small states, the move to governance draws attention to four elements that explain their level of influence. First, those states that are most

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of influence</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>EU policies reflect a member state’s preferences, despite opposition or disinterest of other member states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Progress or agreement that reflect a member state’s preferences in some areas, and does not go against its interests in others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Some issues are in line with a member state’s interests, but some go against them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>(The absence of) EU policies go(es) against a member state’s preferences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Based on Bunse (2009: 8–9)
willing to commit to EU policies will be in the driving seat to define and execute policies. This broadens the analytical scope and shifts the focus to the interaction and dynamics between those actors that have the strongest stake or interest in an issue, placing emphasis on the role of both formal and informal structures in policy-making. Second, these actors will form self-organizing informal groups or networks and aim to foster a political dynamic in a given policy area/issue. The weight of a network in the policy process is directly affected by the extent to which it includes those actors that have the necessary resources to support the preparation, elaboration, implementation and follow-up of EU policies. Third, within these networks, those actors who possess politically relevant resources will find themselves in a preferential situation. A particular emphasis is put on immaterial resources such as expertise and knowledge. Lastly, the influence of a state will be linked to its ability to justify, explain and persuade other actors rather than to use threats or promises (Börzel 1998: 259; Filtenborg et al. 2002: 394–403; Keukeleire 2006: 9; Risse-Kappen 1996: 70).

In what follows, the four elements suggested above – commitment, network capital, immaterial resources and deliberation – will be further elaborated. Table 2 summarizes these elements together with their respective dimensions and criteria.

### Hypothesis-building: small state influence in EU foreign policy

**Commitment**

Two elements determine a state’s commitment: the relative salience of an issue and a state’s dependence on the EU to achieve its policy objectives. The salience of a given policy issue is defined as ‘the extent to which an actor will put into effect its potential to influence other actors and the decision outcome’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Dimension(s)</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>Relative salience</td>
<td>Discourse, national (bilateral) resources, stance in EU bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>EU foreign policy</td>
<td>Common positions, declarations, devoted resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network capital</td>
<td>Quantity</td>
<td>Number and level of contacts, secondments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Trust, information-sharing, pooling resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Immaterial</td>
<td>Content and procedural knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Institutionalization</td>
<td>Dispersion of authority, low politicization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Validity claims</td>
<td>Reference to external bodies and norms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Credibility of speakers</td>
<td>Speak and act consistently, leadership roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resonance of arguments</td>
<td>Appeal to fundamental EU norms and values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Framework for analysis
It should be approached in relative rather than absolute terms: ‘if all actors attach an equally high level of salience to an issue, then none of them will have an advantage due to the levels of salience they attach to the issue’ (Arregui and Thomson 2009: 658). Those states that attach higher levels of salience to a policy issue are likely to display higher levels of activity, strengthening their position in the policy process. Even if this may place small and large states on a more equal footing, there remains a difference between the two: while the latter tend to be proactive in more, if not all, policy issues/areas, small states will need to prioritize a limited number of policy areas (Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006: 659).

It cannot be assumed, however, that small states with a special interest will automatically pursue their objectives through the EU. Even though the EU has become the primary frame of reference for member states’ foreign policies (Smith 2004a: 742), they may ultimately still conduct their foreign policy outside the EU. Small states must therefore also consider the EU as a relevant foreign policy platform to advance their policy objectives. Larsen (2005: 199–200) concludes in his study of Danish foreign policy that the activity of a small member state in the EU is not only dependent on the articulation of strong national policies but also on the extent to which the EU has – or is able to develop – strong and intensive policies towards the issue/area under consideration.

**Network capital**

Networks are a response to the functional interdependence of actors and a way to come to terms with the horizontal and vertical inconsistencies that often hamper effective EU foreign policy-making. They represent an attempt to accommodate each other’s interests, to forge a consensus and to involve those actors that are necessary to elaborate and implement EU policies. With its emphasis on the informality and complexity of policy processes, the network concept is the main alternative to realist perspectives which stress formal channels of access and clear hierarchies (Jachtenfuchs 2001: 253–4).

When networks are relevant formations in the policy process, the network capital of small states becomes an important factor that influences their position: the states with more network capital will be more influential. Naurin (2007: 8–14) defines network capital as the depth and breadth of the networks in which member states are embedded. It has both a qualitative and quantitative dimension: while the former refers to contacts with those actors that have the necessary power resources, the latter is about the amount of contacts. Studies on small states also refer to diplomatic tactics (Björkdahl 2008: 143–6) and honest broker coalition-building (Jakobsen 2009: 87). Although these have a similar meaning, the notion of network capital not only embraces consensus-seeking activities aimed at agreeing to policy action, but also attempts to pool and co-ordinate national efforts and assets to implement policies (Filtenborg et al. 2002: 394–7; Keukeleire 2006: 9). Although large member states are expected to be better ‘connected’ than small states, size is not all and small
member states have the possibility of building up substantial network capital based on (inter-personal) trust and credibility (Arregui and Thomson 2009: 672–3; Naurin 2007: 20–1).

**Immaterial resources**

Realist scholars assume that material resources are the primary determinant of the weight that states carry in policy discussions. Such ‘hard influence’ is composed of objective and attributable factors. Although the governance approach does not neglect material resources all together, it presumes that the main sources of influence are immaterial: the extent to which actors can add value through their expertise, contacts and knowledge (Jönsson et al. 1998; Kronsell 2002: 294–7).

Expertise as a resource refers to content-specific as well as procedural knowledge. While the former is about information of a subject-specific matter, the latter indicates the process of negotiation and is about the command of the negotiation procedure (Björkdahl 2008; Tallberg 2006: 30). The role of content-specific knowledge is particularly important in this context as it can alter the perceptions and understanding of policy issues, generate trust and forge common views on specific foreign policy issues (Smith 2004b: 92).

**Deliberation**

In recent years a move has occurred in EU studies towards theories of communicative action (Niemann 2004; Risse 2000). This shift has not gone unnoticed in the governance literature according to which ideas, beliefs, values and consensual knowledge hold strong explanatory power. Scholars have argued that the interaction pattern in a context of non-hierarchical co-ordination is characterized by communicative action rather than by strategic bargaining which is dominant in realist thinking (Börzel 1998: 264–5; Risse-Kappen 1996: 70). Niemann (2004: 382–3) identifies two crucial differences between strategic bargaining and communicative action: first, the goal of maximizing utility versus reaching a reasoned consensus; and second, a conception of preferences as fixed versus one in which preferences are fluid and subject to change. Nevertheless, Ulbert and Risse (2005: 352) posit that bargaining and arguing as modes of action ‘represent opposite ends of a continuum whereby most of the actual communicative processes take place somewhere in between’.

Analysts have pointed to at least suggestive evidence of patterns of arguing in the EU’s foreign policy system (Arter 2000; Jakobsen 2009; Nasra 2008; Romsløe 2004). Small state studies emphasize that ‘the power of the better argument’ depends not only on the extent to which actors appeal to the EU’s fundamental norms and values and their ability to convince others, but also on arguments which aim at moving the discussion or integration process forward and facilitate consensus- and coalition-building (Jakobsen 2009: 87). Ideational and argumentative elements are thus not only compatible with a rational logic of action, but will in most cases go hand-in-hand. Therefore, communicative action is understood as deliberation, representing a wider conception than both arguing and ‘pure’
communicative action in the sense that the latter two exclude strategically motivated behaviour (Niemann 2004: 384; Ulbert and Risse 2005: 352).

Ulbert and Risse (2005) identify four conditions under which processes of deliberation may occur: first, in a context that is densely institutionalized and based on non-hierarchical relations, actors with relevant knowledge become key players, especially when the institutional process is depoliticized, i.e., when the main actors lack knowledge and are uncertain about their preferences, such ‘knowledge brokers’ are empowered and may find a window of opportunity to exert influence; second, speakers refer to some external authority to make validity claims; third, the credibility and truthfulness of speakers insofar as the persuasiveness of their reasoning is concerned; and fourth, arguments have to resonate with prior knowledge, agreed upon principles and norms, or commonly held worldviews.

THE MAKING OF EU FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Initial relations between the EU and the DRC date back to the late 1950s and were primarily centred on development and economic relations. From the 1990s onwards, political considerations were more explicitly pronounced and member states enhanced the EU’s visibility by appointing an EU Special Representative (EUSR) to the Great Lakes region (Burundi, DRC, Rwanda and Uganda). The ensuing Congolese peace process (2002–2006) allowed the EU to deepen its role in the DRC, deploying two civilian (EUPOL and EUSEC) and two military (Artemis and EUFOR RDC) operations. Today, the EU is one of the key strategic partners of the DRC. Table 3 gives an overview of the level of Belgian influence vis-à-vis the main EU initiatives towards the DRC in the period 2000–2009.

Commitment

Belgium’s willingness to put into effect its potential to influence EU foreign policy towards the DRC is reflected in its active stance in Council bodies and in its elaborate national policies towards the DRC. Several participants in the Africa Working Group and the Political and Security Committee (PSC) confirm that only a handful of member states are regularly involved in the discussions on the DRC, with Belgian officials taking up a central and active role among EU member states. In addition, Belgium maintains elaborate and extensive bilateral relations with the DRC: it maintains the biggest foreign mission in the DRC, its ministers frequently visit the country and its foreign minister has his/her own personal envoy for the region, complementing traditional diplomatic staff. Belgium is the only member state to run bilateral military programmes and its bilateral development policies entail substantial resources, especially when contrasted with other member states’ allocations. In the period 2007–2008, Belgian funds amounted to $192 million, a sum slightly
surpassing the Commission’s financial instruments ($191 million) and those of other big spenders such as the United Kingdom ($157 million), Germany ($68 million) and Sweden ($51 million) (OECD 2008). These national policies are crucial: when one is able to draw upon and refer to own experiences and commitments, one’s arguments and points of view gain in importance and are taken into account, by both small and large member states.

Despite its extensive bilateral relations, Belgium remains dependent on the EU to pursue most of its objectives. The 2001 Belgian Council Presidency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative/level of influence</th>
<th>Belgian preferences</th>
<th>Member states’ preferences</th>
<th>Influence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU–DRC political relations, July–December 2001</td>
<td>Outlining the EU’s political objectives towards the DRC</td>
<td>FR–UK positions at odds; IT, ES, PT in support; other member states neutral/reluctant.</td>
<td>High: troika mission and Council conclusions (12330/01, 13802/01 and 15078/01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemis, June 2003</td>
<td>Support United Nations (UN) request to launch EU military mission</td>
<td>Strong support of FR; DE remains absent; UK is hesitant; support of AT, ES, IE, IT, PT, SE.</td>
<td>High: mission launched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUSEC/EUPOL, May 2005–</td>
<td>Supports a civilian dimension to EU policies</td>
<td>Member states are favourable/do not obstruct; overall little practical support</td>
<td>High: missions launched and be concept is backbone of EUSEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUFOR RDC, summer 2006</td>
<td>Supports for UN request to launch EU military mission</td>
<td>FR in favour; UK hesitant/absent; DE reluctant/negative</td>
<td>Medium: mission launched but remains short and geographically limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion to merge EUSEC and EUPOL, early 2007</td>
<td>Opposes merging the two missions</td>
<td>Member states and Council Secretariat in favour</td>
<td>High: no merger of missions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion to launch military missions, October–December 2008</td>
<td>Supports the launch of a military mission</td>
<td>Opposition of DE, FR, GR, IT and UK; support of ES, FI, IE, SE</td>
<td>No: no mission launched</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s interviews and Bunse (2009).
demonstrated this desire to push for greater EU political involvement in the DRC, wishing ‘to bring about a greater involvement of the European Union in the peace process in Central Africa and the region of the Great Lakes’ (cited in Nasra 2008: 239). Subsequently, Belgium’s focus gradually extended to other policy areas too, notably the civilian and military dimension. Belgian dependence is most strongly pronounced regarding military missions: not only does it have limited military capabilities, Belgian policy-makers are constrained by a parliamentary prohibition on deploying combat troops in former colonies. But also concerning civilian missions, the contributions of other member states make a considerable difference in the pursuit of its objectives.

Network capital

Belgium co-ordinates its actions intensively with three groups of actors: EU member states; EU institutional actors; and external actors. In their daily efforts, Belgian officials are primarily in touch with other member states in the Council. There is a group of countries that are recurrent partners for Belgium in relation to the DRC: France; the UK; the Netherlands; Portugal; Spain; and Sweden. Especially with France, contacts are intense and bilateral co-ordination and information meetings are frequent, in Brussels as well as in Paris. Examples include a joint paper of France and Belgium in which both countries urged the Council Secretariat to work out a civilian dimension to the existing policies as well as the co-ordination of national positions such as in the run-up to the March 2009 visit of France’s President Nicolas Sarkozy to the DRC. During the preparations of the Artemis and EUFOR RDC military missions in 2003 and 2006 respectively, the bilateral contacts between France and Belgium were crucial to steer the plans for the operation through the decision-making machinery. Their close co-operation in the Council bodies created a political dynamic that fostered a critical mass of member states to support the (French-led) missions. Making use of the window of opportunity created by France, Belgium actively rallied for support to launch the missions (especially among the smaller member states).

A second group of actors through which Belgium exerts influence is the EU’s institutional actors, inside as well as outside of Brussels; especially the Council Secretariat and the EUSR have offered extensive possibilities for Belgium to advance EU activity. Given that most member states lack expertise and diplomatic resources in the region and the EUSR’s position as a neutral actor that provides EU-made information, the EUSR is in a position where he/she can shape and frame debates, set the agenda and guide member states in the elaboration of their common positions. The civilian missions are a telling example. From 2003 onwards, the EUSR together with the Africa Desk of the High Representative’s (HR’s) Policy Unit explored the possibilities to integrate the ESDP’s civilian instruments in EU policies towards the DRC. After recurrent reporting by the EUSR, the HR sent a fact-finding mission headed by officials from his Policy Unit to undertake an in-depth assessment to be presented to the
PSC. Whereas a civilian dimension to EU policies towards the DRC was at that point at least debatable, the HR managed with the support of only a handful of member states to gather a critical mass to approve the launch of two very limited civilian missions. Once these were in place, the Council Secretariat’s activities were directed to extend the scope of EUPOL and EUSEC. In other words, it has been of utmost importance for Belgium to be on the same line as the EUSR, either to move him/her to its position or to align itself with him/her. The secondment of national officials is a useful tool in this respect. Although these officials are assumed to be independent, they can help to get national perspectives more easily taken into account. In the Council Secretariat, Belgium has seconded various national officials to the HR’s Policy Unit, the services of the EUSR, as well as the field missions.

In contrast to the traditional notion of the Commission as small member states’ ‘best friend’, the case of the DRC illustrates that their relation is not as straightforward as this analogy may suggest. In discussions on the DRC, the Commission has several assets that have strengthened its role considerably over the years: a long-standing engagement in the region; an extensive network of delegations; and significant financial resources. The personal commitment of the former Belgian Commissioner for Development, Louis Michel, further enhanced the Commission’s political profile. In contrast to the EUSR, who has to balance member states’ positions carefully, the Commission has a much more independent role. For Belgium, this has resulted in a reduced leeway to strengthen its national position through the Commission. Yet, it still advances its analyses and points of view through the secondment of national officials to the Commission’s services (e.g., cabinet of the Commissioner for Development and in Directorate-General External Relations). Also, close contacts on the ground with the Commission’s Delegation help in getting its points of view and priorities heard by the Commission.

Forums and partners outside the EU are a last group of actors with which Belgium co-ordinates its actions. Close contacts with international partners have reinforced Belgium’s possibilities of wielding influence in the EU: either directly, by strengthening its expertise and credibility, or indirectly via EU institutional actors, seconded officials (e.g., in the civilian and military missions) and key member states that are active in the DRC. Additionally, Belgium maintains frequent diplomatic contacts on the DRC, bilaterally with Canada, Japan, Norway, South Africa, the United States and, to a lesser extent, China, as well as multilaterally with the African Union, International Monetary Fund, Worldbank and regional contact groups. The latter serve to analyse the situation, share information and co-ordinate positions, but do not take any formal decisions. Rather, they prepare the elaboration of proposals and decisions for other forums such as the United Nations (UN). Also in the UN, Belgium actively tries to advance its views and analyses. During its membership of the UN Security Council (2007–2008), Belgium invested substantially in the DRC, namely in the issue of illegal exploitation of natural resources and in the renewal of the mandate of the UN Mission (MONUC).
Immaterial resources

Belgium has devoted relatively few material resources to EU initiatives towards the DRC. Most of its efforts are immaterial: keeping the DRC on the agenda; sharing information; and fostering consensus among member states. Various examples are illustrative. In elaborating the plans for the civilian missions, the HR’s Policy Unit picked up the concept of *brassage* from Belgian programmes in the DRC. This denotes the integration of the DRC’s four regional military factions into one national army. The concept was subsequently translated into a proposal that laid the ground for EUSEC. Another example can be found in early 2007 when the Council Secretariat was working on an initiative to merge both civilian missions. While most member states supported the idea, hoping to cut costs of implementation, Belgium did not. Supplying information and analyses based on assessments of its national programmes, Belgium argued that at a time when the institutional structures of these missions were not yet fully fledged, integrating both missions would jeopardize the efficiency achieved on the ground. In the end, the Council Secretariat did not issue any formal proposal and maintained the current character of the missions. Also its Council Presidency was a valuable immaterial resource: it allowed Belgium to ‘set the locomotive in motion for long-term EU commitment towards the region’ (Bunse 2009: 154). The immediate challenge was to move Africa, and the DRC in particular, from the development into the foreign domain in the Council. To this end, Belgium focused on easing the tensions between the UK and France, whose positions on Africa had long been at odds. By frequently putting the Great Lakes on the Council agenda, issuing Council conclusions and launching the first-ever troika mission to the region, Belgium used its unmatched expertise on the topic as well as the power of the chair to commit the EU more deeply to the Great Lakes (Bunse 2009: 123–31).

Nevertheless, the limits of immaterial resources as a source of influence were clearly illustrated at the end of 2008 when member states discussed the possibility to send a military mission to the east of the DRC. While Belgium, among other small states, pleaded strongly and openly for an EU mission and actively supplied its analyses and points of view in the various Council bodies, large member states remained unfavourable to an EU intervention. The lack of a common appreciation of the situation in East Congo as well as the outspoken opposition of all large member states reduced the influence of Belgium to virtually none. One participant acknowledges that a country like Belgium cannot do much as long as there is no window of opportunity created by at least one large member state.

Deliberation

Belgium often makes use of deliberation as an instrument to advance its policy objectives. Confirming Ulbert and Risse’s findings (2005: 347–54), Belgium has been successful in convincing other member states of its positions when
the policy process was characterized by non-hierarchical relations among actors and when policy issues were depoliticized. Over the past decade, it has proposed – on its own or in concert – several innovative ideas and arguments that have shaped the EU’s engagement in the DRC. In the run up to its Presidency, Belgium published an action plan that sketched out the core elements for a future EU approach towards the Great Lakes and which was later adopted by all member states (Bunse 2009: 123–6). Another example is the development and continuation of the civilian missions. Besides their intrinsic value, these ideas were also strategic as they facilitated a consensus-building process: they eased the suspicion of those member states that viewed Africa solely in terms of development aid and which were reluctant to link a strong political, civilian and military dimension to the EU’s engagement in the DRC. But even with respect to the military missions Artemis and EUFOR RDC – two issues that were highly politicized and dominated by large member states – Belgium’s argumentative efforts contributed to the launch of both operations. Along with the support of France and the backing of the UN, Belgium pursued an active multilateral and bilateral diplomacy in Council bodies in Brussels and in some key European capitals (notably London and Berlin) aimed at fostering a critical mass of member states to support (or not obstruct) the launch of both missions. In contrast, the non-intervention of the EU at the end of 2008 illustrates the limits of a small state’s deliberative efforts. While some member states favoured a rapprochement of the DRC and Rwanda, Belgium (among others) was strongly in favour of launching an EU military mission. Despite its argumentative effort in the various Council bodies and its willingness to contribute combat forces, the opposition of all three large member states (and external actors – Rwanda, South Africa and the US) reduced the leeway for deliberative processes to take root and, as a result, to exert influence.

Another essential factor has been the credibility and truthfulness of Belgium’s overall policy stance and engagement in the DRC. Belgium emphasizes that it has no hidden political and/or mercantile agenda. As one Belgian official puts it: ‘Belgium no longer has any vital interests to protect in Central Africa, even in the DRC, despite its potential riches. But it is convinced that it has a moral responsibility to demonstrate solidarity with the region in Africa it knows best and where it still has numerous ties’ (cited in Bunse 2009: 129). Belgium has thus acquired a reputation among EU member states as a predictable and consensus-minded country that openly seeks to establish a strong European profile in the DRC.

Lastly, recognizing possible suspicion from its European counterparts, Belgium aims at resonating its arguments by appealing to the overall aims and values of the EU. It makes a strong moral case and argues that the EU has a historical responsibility to assist member states’ former colonies with their difficulties today. In addition, Belgian authorities highlight the EU’s strategic interest to engage in regions that are geographically close to it. Table 4 summarizes the presence and variation of sources of Belgian influence vis-à-vis the main EU initiatives towards the DRC in the period 2000–2009.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initiative/source of influence</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Network capital</th>
<th>Immaterial resources</th>
<th>Deliberation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EU–DRC political relations, July–December 2001</td>
<td>Present: high relative salience; high dependence</td>
<td>Present: Council Secretariat, FR, UK, European Commission present: FR, UN, contact groups</td>
<td>Present: long-time historical ties; active bilateral relations; Council Presidency diminished</td>
<td>Present: moral case; historical responsibility; strategic EU interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemis, June 2003</td>
<td>Present: high relative salience; high dependence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Slightly diminished: need to show European credibility towards Congolese (peace process) and the UN (effective multilateralism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUFOR RDC summer 2006</td>
<td>Present: high relative salience; high dependence</td>
<td>Present: bilateral relations, FR, UN, contact groups</td>
<td>Diminished</td>
<td>Slightly diminished: need to secure the final step of the (costly) peace process (elections)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion to merge EUSEC and EUPOL, early 2007</td>
<td>Present: high relative salience</td>
<td>Present: Council Secretariat</td>
<td>Present: expertise, credibility</td>
<td>Present: jeopardize efficiency and risk losing Congolese interlocutors; credibility and truthfulness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSION

This article has sought to balance the view that large member states dominate EU foreign policy and leave small states no choice other than to play at the margins of the game. That large states have played a central role in EU foreign policy towards the DRC has not been contradicted. Belgium has indeed benefited greatly from its close relations with France. Moreover, Belgium’s role can in part be explained by the fact that most member states did not always have an outspoken interest in the DRC. Such a reading, however, falls short of explaining important steps taken during the past decade. The empirical analysis has shown that Belgium has significantly influenced the development of EU policies towards the DRC. Being one of the most committed member states, Belgium has made a continuous effort to put the DRC on the EU’s agenda, it has done substantial networking behind the scenes to forge agreements, it has shared its unmatched expertise and knowledge, and it has created a political dynamic reinvigorating policy debates.

Does the governance approach, then, add to our understanding of small states’ possibilities to influence EU foreign policy? The analysis provided here does not suggest discarding realist assumptions, nor does it consider small states as equally influential as large states. But in a context where the authority to take decisions becomes increasingly dispersed among various actors and policy levels, the governance approach helps us to understand how small states may gain in importance and how they may play a central role in EU foreign policy. Rather than size or material capabilities, the emphasis on commitment, network capital and immaterial resources proved useful to explain small states’ influence.

In addition, it has been demonstrated that the framework’s explanatory value increases when it is combined with theories of communicative action. The role of small states in EU foreign policy cannot be adequately explained without conceding that argumentative rather than strategic action prevailed during important phases of the policy process, such as agenda-setting and decision-making. When the level of politicization is low, member states lack knowledge and small states act credibly, dynamics of deliberation explain how relationships of power and hierarchies recede in the background and the influence of materially weaker actors is disproportionately enhanced. This is not to say, however, that realist accounts of strategic bargaining should be dismissed. These accounts have their legitimate place, as the discussions on the military missions have shown.

On a more general level, it is suggested that the study of small states offers complementary insights into the EU’s foreign policy system. In a Union of 27 and more, the relevance of small states is set to increase considerably, particularly with respect to policy issues/areas considered important to a certain number of member states but not necessarily to all. Small states may even take the lead in areas of national importance, creating policy dynamics and giving the necessary political impetus to EU foreign policy. Table 4 summarizes the presence and variation of sources of Belgian influence vis-à-vis the main EU initiatives towards the DRC in the period 2000–2009.
Further research could benefit from a comparative analysis that includes other small states with diverse foreign policy profiles and preferences in order to confirm, reject or refine the results of this article. Also, a more in depth analysis of which conditions for influence apply to which stages of the policy process and how these may vary across policy issues/areas would enhance our understanding of the role of small states in EU foreign policy. Lastly, the impact of the newly established European External Action Service deserves great attention.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to all the officials I interviewed who took their time to share their invaluable expertise and experiences with me. Thanks also to the editor and the anonymous referees whose input was of great value. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 11th biennial international conference of the European Union Studies Association, Los Angeles, USA. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not reflect the views of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

NOTES

1 The empirical material comes from semi-structured élite interviews conducted in 2006, 2007 and 2009. In total, 20 officials were interviewed from the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (including the Belgian embassy in Kinshasa and Permanent Representation to the EU), the Permanent Representations to the EU of the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom, the European Commission (including its Delegation in Kinshasa) and the Council Secretariat.

2 This case study should be viewed as a plausibility probe rather than a rigorous test of the formulated hypotheses. It is an attempt to determine whether the validity of the insights drawn from the governance approach and theories of communicative action can be considered great enough to warrant full-fledged testing. Nevertheless, even if generalizations remain premature, the validity of the case is enhanced in two ways: (1) the embedment in the existing small states literature; and (2) the selection of the case. The choice for Belgium and the DRC has been made on the basis of Belgium’s strong preferences, its long-term bilateral relations and its desire to conduct a substantial part of its relations with the DRC through the EU. It can therefore be assumed that it will try to exploit all resources at its disposal to influence EU policies towards the DRC, representing a case that may reveal information about the mechanisms and dynamics of small state influence. Furthermore, the case includes three sub-cases: (1) civilian missions; (2) political relations; and (3) military missions. These have been selected on the basis of two variables that are considered central in the small states
literature: the degree of politicization and the degree of institutionalization (Thor-
hallsson and Wivel 2006). Sub-case 1 is characterized by low politicization and
medium institutionalization; sub-case 2 by medium politicization and medium insti-
tutionalization; and sub-case 3 by strong politicization and weak institutionalization.
Given the choice of extremes, the case might be called critical: if the constitutive
elements of small state influence hold for this case, then it could tentatively be
expected to be valid for a large number of small states/policy areas (Eckstein
1975; Flyvbjerg 2006).

REFERENCES


