The European Union as an actor in international relations. 
A geographical assessment of European actorness

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ABSTRACT.— This paper studies EU actorness, i.e. its ability to influence international relations and to impose its values on a global scale. By offering a geographical interpretation of actorness criteria, the authors attempt to define the extent to which a political entity can be seen as an actor in international relations. This approach is applied to the European Union, focusing on three criteria of the actorness: opportunity, consistency and effectiveness. This method leads to the conclusion that the European Union is an incomplete and fragile actor insofar as it displays low levels actorness in certain areas.

ACTORNESs, euRopeAN union, inTeRnATionAleS inTeRnATionAl TRAiTÉ

SincE the 1970s, a number of researchers have been debating the nature of the European Union (EU), in particular its status as an actor in international relations (Hoffmann, Keohane, 1991; Moravcik 1993; Lequesne, 1996). In international relations, an actor is an individual or a collective entity capable of devising a personal strategy and acting autonomously in order to achieve certain objectives (Crozier, Friedberg, 1992). An actor can also be defined as an entity whose actions in international or transnational domains have an impact on the distribution of resources and the definition of certain values at the global level (Batistella et al., 2006). Proponents of the realist approach in international relations
initially applied this concept to States; it was later extended to other types of entities involved in international relations or with transnational activities\(^1\) (international organizations, non-governmental organizations, companies, etc.) (Merle, 1986).

Some of these realists continue to doubt the EU’s actorness, justly arguing that the EU is neither a state nor a constituted political entity and is not in a position to act rationally (Lavenex, Merand, 2007). Therefore, it cannot be a full-fledged actor in international relations (Rosamond, 2005; Hveem, 2000) and should not be called an actor under any circumstances (Diez, 2005; Sjursen, 2006). However, since the late 1970s, Gunnar Sjöstedt has renewed the debate by affirming that the European Economic Community is an incomplete actor capable of articulating Member States’ interests and preferences in order to implement autonomous external action (Sjöstedt, 1977). More recently, various studies have attempted to show that, on the contrary, the EU is a major actor in international relations by highlighting the fact that its uncertain legal status has been clarified by the Maastricht and Lisbon treaties (Bretherton, Vogler, 1999; Helly, Smalltown, 2005; Smalltown, 2006; Frank, 2008).

Finally, the EU’s status, the core issue in the debate between the proponents of the above approaches, has been partially determined by Jupille Joseph and James Caporaso, as well as Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, who proposed a new definition for actors in international relations (Bretherton, Vogler, 1999), suggesting the expression, “collective actor”, for example (Jupille, Caporaso, 1998). Others have proposed the concept of a “European External Action System” (Helly, 2005). All have since agreed to consider the EU as a veritable actor in international relations (Bretherton, Vogler, 1999; Smalltown, 2002; Smith, 2003; Helly Smalltown, 2005).

This article will assess the relevance of the concept of actorness by showing that geography can significantly contribute to debates on the EU’s role in international relations. Actorness is based on a set of criteria that we will present and interpret spatially. Scholars of international relations have never used such an approach; too few consider geographical space an important parameter. In the first half of this article, we will review international relations publications on actorness and focus on their relevance for the EU. Then we will present a geographical interpretation of certain criteria for actorness (opportunity, coherence or cohesion, and effectiveness). In the second half of the article, we will apply the geographical interpretation of actorness to an assessment of the EU’s place in international relations in various domains by empirically testing certain of these criteria.

**Actor and actorness in international relations: Concepts and geographical interpretation**

**What is an actor in international relations?**

Research in international relations concerning actorness focuses on two areas. Certain authors concentrate on the dialectical relationship between structure and agent (Wendt, 1987) by using structuralist, constructivist, or individualist approaches. Their goal is to capture the forces at work in the relationship between Actor and System. Other authors prefer to focus their research on actorness (Sjöstedt, 1977, Smith 2003), which Gunnar Sjöstedt defined as: “the capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system” (ibid., 1977, p. 16).
He thus connects actorness with the ability to respond effectively to others’ needs and to act accordingly in a given context (Bretherton, Vogler, 1999). For the EU, this approach presupposes the existence of common values among member countries; a high level of legitimacy in the decision-making process; the capacity to set priorities in foreign policy; and the ability to identify, develop, and implement policies while using all of the instruments of international relations (diplomacy, negotiations, etc.).

Recent studies have gone beyond the pioneering work of Gunnar Sjöstedt. Jupille Joseph and James Caporaso (1998) identify four dimensions of actorness: (1) cohesion, the degree to which the group is able to formulate and articulate internally consistent policy preferences; (2) authority, where the entity’s joint activities have some sort of legal sanction; (3) autonomy, where the entity has a distinctive identity and interests that are independent of other actors including its most prominent constituent members; and (4) recognition, where other actors recognize, accept, and interact with the entity. Many studies on the EU’s image have explored this last dimension and several publications have tested it by analyzing how the EU is perceived by non-EU countries (Lucarelli, Fioramonti, 2010).

Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler (2006) expanded the list of criteria for actorness by combining three aspects. (1) Opportunity denotes factors in the external environment of the actor under consideration, in the structural context of the EU’s actions. This refers to the idea that in international relations, no actor can be considered completely independent. An actor’s every action is conceived and implemented within a certain context that constrains or enables actorness. (2) Presence describes the EU’s ability to exert influence beyond its borders. In this case, the influence is the actor’s ability to change their partners’ behavior by using methods and resources such as soft or hard power. (3) Capability refers to the internal context of EU external actions, considered a determinant of its capacity to act. This last criterion covers various aspects: the legitimacy of the decision-making process, the legitimate character of foreign policy priorities (which assumes the existence of shared values among EU member states), and the existence of common political instruments. The work of Bretherton and Vogler falls in the epistemological perspective of social constructivism and contributes to the debate on the relationship between “structure” and “agent”. In their analysis, the “criteria” of actorness can be found at different levels of the dialectic between “structure” and “agent”.

Some researchers have chosen to focus on the relationship between actorness and effectiveness (Hill, 1993; Bretherton, Vogler 1999; Ginsberg, 1999; Laatikainen, 2003; Smith 2006) resulting in several important questions. Once the EU has identified certain priorities and implemented certain political instruments, is it capable of achieving its objectives? Does the EU’s external action allow it to transform existing reality? Or, on the contrary, is the EU’s external action completely determined by preexisting conditions? Some studies have tackled these questions by directing their analysis toward the so-called “capability expectation gap”, or the relative distance between the declared objectives and the actual results obtained by the EU (Hill, 1993; Bretherton, Vogler, 2006; Elgström, Smith, 2006; Panebianco 2006; Balducci, 2008). A link has thus been established between the EU’s ability to achieve its objectives and its degree of internal coherence (Smith, 2006; Groenleer Van Schaik, 2007), or the collective policy preferences of its members.
A geographical interpretation of the criteria for actorness

Based on these components, it is possible to develop a geographical approach to actorness that spatially interprets some of the above criteria. In most available studies, international relations scholars have focused on action areas in which the EU can be considered an actor. Their approach is therefore sector-based. However, their research is generally disconnected from geography, apart from a few exceptions (Hettne, Söderbaum, 1998; 2000; Christiansen et al., 2000; Tsankova, 2005). Their findings generally fall within a range of now well-established ideas: the EU’s actorness varies depending on the area of action (trade, environment, etc.), the partner organization (UN, WTO, etc.), or degree of communitization of its policies. By spatially reinterpreting the criteria for actorness, geography offers a new tool with which to test these criteria and to examine the geography of the EU as an actor. This helps define in which part of the world the EU can truly be considered as such.

Certain criteria for actorness enable a geographical reading, especially opportunity, coherence, and effectiveness:

• From a structuralist perspective, opportunity raises questions about the influence of the global environment (characterized by power relations, particular political and economic situations, and the international agenda) on an actor's initiatives. For example, one might recall the rapid development of the international situation in the 1990s, following the collapse of Communist regimes, which led the EU to take on new responsibilities and increase its fields of action. From a geographical approach, we can try to determine whether the geography of the EU’s external action merely validates a global context by adapting to existing situations, or whether it actually helps restructure these situations. More generally, does the geography of the EU’s external action conform to an existing context or does it help to change that context? Within such a context, we can also consider the link between the expansion of the EU’s policies in geographic space and the geography of its functional relations with various parts of the world (e.g., the strength of its economic ties).

• Cohesion is linked to criteria of consistency. It has often been used by researchers interested in the internal complexity of European institutions, notably the European Commission (Coombes, 1970; Michelmann 1978; Cram 1994; Lequesne, 1996). Various sociological studies of organizations have shown existing divisions, even conflicts, between the Commission’s components, between European institutions, and between these institutions and EU member states. These studies have led researchers to conclude that the idea of internal complexity must be studied more closely in order to comprehend the EU’s role as an actor and as a political entity with a global vocation. Since the 1990s, certain anthropologists have taken this approach by studying the power relations between the European Commission and the member states (Abeles et al., 1993; Abeles, 1994; Meny et al., 1995). In this particular context, consistency refers to the EU’s ability to achieve goals in the external domain that respect clear objectives and to make political choices that do not contradict each other. Pascal Gautier (2004) went further by distinguishing between horizontal and vertical coherence. Horizontal coherence designates both the absence of contradiction between actions in different foreign policy areas and the ability to establish collaboration between these policies. Vertical coherence refers to the absence of contradiction between the EU and its member states. In this regard for example, Damien Helly (2005) has shown that to be consistent, the EU’s policies in Africa should meet three conditions: consistency
between the fundamental principles for implemented policies, no contradiction between implemented actions stemming from these policies, and no contradiction between fundamental political principles and said actions. For these researchers, consistency must be sought in several areas: between policies in various parts of the world, between EU member states and European institutions, between rhetoric and practice, between sectoral policies, and between policy instruments and strategies (e.g., in the field of development assistance). The cohesion criterion can also lead to geographic questions. Is there geographical consistency (in terms of juxtaposition or complementarity) among the EU’s external actions? Is there cohesion between the geography of member states’ external actions and the geography of the EU’s actions? One can go further by asking whether the EU decides to intensify its action and presence (in various forms) in regions where it is hardly present or in regions where it already has strong functional relationships.

- Effectiveness can be defined as the ability to achieve a specific policy’s objectives. This criterion leads to a simple geographic question: in which parts of the world does the EU’s foreign policy have the greatest impact?

**Testing the EU’s actoriness from a geographical perspective**

We have seen that it is possible to test these three criteria for actoriness using a geographical approach. In this section, we will first test the criterion of opportunity by comparing the geography of the EU’s functional relationships with the geography of its foreign policy actions. Then we will evaluate the coherence of this external action in several ways: by comparing the official discourse that establishes the European neighborhood as strategic priority regions for the EU; and by comparing two types of foreign policy: bilateral trade agreements and development aid. Finally, we will focus on the criterion of effectiveness by observing the effects of the bilateral trade agreements that the EU has signed with various countries. This approach will allow us to explore the relationship between “structure” and “agency”: geographical proximity (neighboring countries) and foreign trade fall under the context of the EU’s action (structure), while development aid and bilateral agreements fall under “agency”.

To understand the geography of the EU’s foreign policy action, we will use a simple and underused indicator: the geography of international bilateral agreements signed by the European Communities and the EU since the late 1950s. In other words, in the empirical tests proposed below, the geography of international treaties is compared to other functional or political aspects of the EU’s external action. We chose this geographical indicator because one can postulate that, through international bilateral agreements, the EU means to intensify and better regulate its relationships with the countries or regions it has chosen in different areas. One can therefore suppose that the geography of bilateral treaties signed by the EU is neither trivial nor incidental, to the extent that partner countries have been chosen as the result of political reflection.

The geographical distribution of international treaties signed by the European Communities and the EU since the 1950s is mixed (fig. 1). Interactions are strongest between the countries in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), North America, Australia, and New Zealand. The high level of political relations with EFTA countries reminds us that they are practically members of the EU. However, their relationships with the EU do not take the same form: Switzerland did not wish
2. The European Economic Area brings together the 27, soon 28, member states of the EU and the three countries of the European Free Trade Association: Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway. Signed in 1992, this agreement incorporates the three countries into the European common market by ensuring the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital. Here we have two separate types of association to the EU, with Switzerland favoring a more bilateral association than the other three countries, but the results are almost identical.

3. (Flow between the EU and country i)/(Total flows between the EU and the rest of the world).

In research on actorness, opportunity designates the influence of structures on political action, and therefore the actor’s degree of autonomy. In our case, we plan to compare the geography of bilateral international treaties signed by the EU, based only on the number of treaties signed with different countries, and the functional ties that the EU has established with them. These ties include both economic and human capital flows between Europe and the rest of the world. They are based on the trade of goods (exports and imports), foreign investments (inbound and outbound), migration, student migration, and air routes.

However, there are two ways of viewing the EU’s functional ties. On the one hand, we can measure each country’s weight in terms of the EU’s relations, identifying those regions most important to it. We will call this data the “weight” of EU partners. On the other hand, we can consider the EU’s importance in relations with non-EU members, which will evaluate its influence around the world. This measure will be the EU’s “influence”. Figure 2 illustrates these two perspectives: the surface area of the circles indicates the spaces that matter to the EU (“weight”), while the color assesses the EU’s importance in these countries’ external relations (“influence”).

There are two possible case scenarios. On the one hand, a strong link between a country’s weight within the EU and the number of treaties it has signed could illustrate the importance of structural factors on the EU’s actions and the political importance it grants its main partners. On the other hand, a strong link between the EU’s influence and the number of treaties signed could indicate a certain amount of autonomy.

Comparing the maps underlines the diversity of situations rather than any strong correlations. For example, some countries are functionally important for the EU, but have not signed treaties with it (China). The opposite is also true (Afghanistan). Similarly, certain countries strongly influenced by the EU have signed few treaties with it. This can be observed in many sub-Saharan African nations.
By taking our analysis a step further by calculating correlations, we see that they are much higher with the “weight” variable (the importance of partners for the EU) than with the variable showing the EU’s “influence” on its partners. In the first case, the correlation is 45%, whereas it does not exceed 10% in the second. In other words, the more important a partner is to the EU, the more treaties will be signed between the two.

Going further still, we created a simple explanatory model showing the number of treaties signed between the EU and every country in the world in order to test the impact of the “weight” and “influence” variables described above (fig. 2). For this model, we used countries’ importance as a control variable, measured by population volume, their wealth (GDP per capita) and their distance to the (geometric) center of the European Union (table 1). In Model 1, the “distance” variable is not introduced, contrary to Model 2. The models are highly efficient in that they account for about 55% of the information ($R^2$) with just a few variables.

The results confirm that the geography of the EU’s treaties is strongly correlated, if not explained, by various countries’ importance in the EU’s functional relations. The “influence” variable is also correlated with the number of treaties, but this correlation is not as strong. In other words, by introducing a few additional variables, we found a significant correlation between the EU’s influence and the number of treaties it has signed with a country. However, this correlation is lower than the countries’ “weight” variable for the EU.

In an alternative model (Model 3), we have replaced the “distance” variable with two binary variables of neighborhood, the first being countries that are very close geographically (Switzerland, Norway, Turkey, Western Balkans) and the second being countries included within the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) (excluding Turkey and including Russia). This model shows significant improvement ($R^2$ up to 65%) when taking into account a variable of neighborhood. However, being a country in the European neighborhood, most of which are officially included in the ENP, does not significantly increase the number of treaties signed, all other things being equal.

This analysis definitively indicates that the geography of the EU’s bilateral relations is strongly determined by the importance of the functional relations the EU shares with each country in the world. In conclusion, the possible degrees of the EU’s role as an actor are limited: the countries...
with which it signs treaties are the ones with which it has strong functional ties and, therefore, are countries that enjoy considerable weight with the EU.

**Cohesion 1: Neighbors in official discourse versus neighbors in the geography of external political action**

Officially, neighboring countries and regions are a priority on the EU’s political agenda. Through the European Neighborhood Policy, the EU is trying to achieve several objectives, including making its regional environment more secure and more stable and extending to neighboring countries certain norms and freedoms (free movement of goods, services, and capital). In this context, we will examine the EU’s degree of consistency by analyzing the geography of bilateral international treaties it has signed with non-EU countries (fig. 1). We can thus determine whether neighboring countries are particularly targeted, and whether the growing importance of neighbors in EU discourse holds true in its actual political relations.

Looking at the geographical distribution of international treaties signed by the EEC and the EU since the 1950s in all areas, neighbors do not appear to be a priority as a whole. The countries most often targeted by the EU are those within the European Economic Area (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway), with 151 out of 784 signed treaties and agreements in December 2011⁵. However, North America comes in second with 86 treaties. Outside the European Economic Area, neighboring regions can be divided into three groups: former USSR countries (78 treaties), followed by the countries in the southern and eastern Mediterranean region (72 without Turkey), and then the Western Balkans (60). However, the Mediterranean countries do not appear at the top of the list when considered individually: Israel ranks only 8th in terms of the number of treaties signed with the EEC and the EU, ahead of Turkey (12th), Morocco (24th),

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>0.559</td>
<td>0.560</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The variables for “influence” and “distance” are slightly above the threshold of collinearity (Spearman’s Rho 0.545) as well as the variables for “weight” and “population” (Rho 0.541). This means these variables are correlated, and thus the resulting statistical models should be interpreted with caution since the effect of one of the variables on the dependent variable can be fully captured by the other. In this case, the “population” variable is never significant because its impact is partially covered by the “weight” variable. However, when these variables are removed, the main results are not affected.

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⁵. A figure that would be even higher if we added the treaties signed by Switzerland, which, like the countries of the European Economic Area, could almost be considered a member of the EU.
Egypt (30th), Jordan (31st), Tunisia (44th), Algeria (49th), Syria (62nd), the Palestinian Authority (75th), Lebanon (78th), and Libya (116th). The countries of the former Soviet Union and the Western Balkan countries are often better ranked. Taken as a whole, this neighboring region rose to 46% of total treaties signed in December 2011, which suggests a high degree of consistency between discourse and action. But this comes with a large drawback, because the EU’s discourse targets countries eligible for the ENP and not neighbors such as Switzerland and those in the European Economic Area. Yet the combined countries eligible for the ENP have only signed 17% of the treaties. This confirms the earlier findings in Model 3 (Table 1). The introduction of a binary variable of proximity slightly improves the model. Being a country eligible for the ENP (along with Russia) does not significantly increase the number of treaties signed, all other things being equal.

The conclusion is the same when we observe the number of clauses in the text of the treaties the EU has signed. These clauses are an additional element of security because they establish obligations about how treaties are to be implemented. They are particularly numerous for treaties signed with countries such as Switzerland, Russia, Montenegro, the United States, Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Ukraine, South Korea, Norway, Canada, Croatia, Serbia, Moldova and Georgia. In contrast, there are fewer clauses in treaties signed with Mediterranean countries.


The number of treaties signed by various neighboring regions balances out over time, especially in the 2000s (fig. 3). The intensification of political relations is particularly strong with neighbors to the east (with the exception of Belarus) and the western Balkans. The Mediterranean countries lag significantly behind in terms of number of treaties per country.

By entering into the details of the treaties, we can draw two conclusions. First, the neighboring countries have signed the majority of international treaties in only a few domains: external relations, foreign policy and security, anti-fraud, justice and security, transportation, external trade and free trade. Second, the sectorial distribution of treaties is not the same for neighbors as it is for the rest of the world. This confirms the particular importance of security issues in relations between the EU and neighboring countries: 59% of anti-fraud treaties and 26% of treaties on justice and security were signed with the countries of the Western Balkans; in the eastern

Fig. 3: Number of treaties signed by EEC and the EU with its various neighboring regions

6. Made up of the following countries: Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, countries eligible for the ENP, Turkey, and the Western Balkans.
region (including Russia), there is more emphasis on energy (19%), foreign and security policy (19%), external relations (15%), and justice (14%). This information can be interpreted in several ways. One can note a form of consistency in the EU’s external action: it avoids scattering its efforts in neighboring regions by privileging certain areas of action over others. It can also be viewed as a political bias, based on a rather negative image of its neighbors, who are associated with insecurity, fraud, trafficking, etc.

Cohesion 2: Foreign trade policy versus development assistance

We can assume that, in order to truly be considered an actor in international relations, the EU must maintain geographical coherence between its various forms of external action. We will test this coherence by comparing its external trade policy with its political actions in other areas. To determine the degree of coherence of the EU’s external action, we can thus geographically analyze external trade cooperation as compared to development aid. In table 2, these two dimensions have been crossed with a third – the degree of neighborliness with the EU –, which, as we have seen, is important in the analysis of the EU’s external action. Several lessons can be drawn from this table.

The Western Balkans and Turkey are by far the two neighboring regions most integrated into the European market. Turkey has been a member of the EU Customs Union since the 1990s and the Western Balkan countries are linked to the EU by various enhanced agreements (Stabilization and Association Agreements: SAA), which include a commercial component. In addition, these two neighborhoods receive the largest part of their development aid from the EU (41% of aid received from 2008 to 2009, without counting bilateral aid provided by EU member states).

As for the other neighbors (Neighborhood 2), we observe a paradox: European aid is higher in countries where no commercial treaty exists. Even by excluding the Palestinian territories, which receive a massive amount of EU development aid, the conclusion is the same. Aid is higher for countries that have not signed a trade agreement with the EU (particularly Ukraine, Belarus, the Caucasus, and Libya). However, for the eastern region, the lack of a trade agreement does not explain why the area is

Tab. 2 / Development assistance paid by the European Commission to developing countries, by groups of countries and trade agreements (2008-2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood 1</th>
<th>Development assistance per person ($/capita)</th>
<th>The EU’s share of development assistance received by these countries (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with trade agreement</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without trade agreement</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Neighborhood 2</th>
<th>with trade agreement</th>
<th>6.4</th>
<th>17.9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>idem without occupied territories</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without trade agreement</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rest of the world</th>
<th>with trade agreement</th>
<th>3.9</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>without trade agreement</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>with trade agreement</th>
<th>7.9</th>
<th>19.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>without trade agreement</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Neighborhood 1 includes Turkey and the Western Balkans, Neighborhood 2 includes countries eligible for the ENP, along with Russia. Sources: Roodman, 2011 (development assistance); Commercial treaties: FTA Database, EU (trade agreements).
not a priority for the EU. Rather, the explanation lies in resistance from Russia, which has attempted to reconstruct or consolidate its regional sphere of influence by promoting alternative regional associations in this area.

Countries that have signed trade agreements (North Africa7 with the exception of Libya, Moldova, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria – the latter signed an interim agreement) also receive substantial aid, and the EU’s share of aid provided to these countries is high. However, there are significant differences from one country to another if we reduce to the aid paid per capita for the recipient country: Moldova receives the highest amount of aid per capita, confirming the EU’s elevated interest in the Eastern region, while Algeria and Syria receive the lowest amounts.

In the rest of the world, there are large disparities with regard to the relationship between trade policy and development aid. Countries that have signed free trade agreements with the EU receive more development aid per capita, and the EU’s share in the official development aid granted to these countries is higher as well. This gives some credence to the hypothesis of consistency in the EU’s external action.

In general, there is a clear relationship between the existence of trade agreements, the amount of development aid granted to a beneficiary country, and the EU’s share in the aid disbursed in that country. The only exceptions to this rule are most of the countries in the Eastern region. However, we should not jump to conclusions and think that a causal relationship exists between these two dimensions of the EU’s external action: signing a trade agreement and providing development aid both fall under political decisions that do not necessarily fit into an overall plan. We could also posit that these actions sometimes result from one-time choices dictated by particular circumstances, which are not always predictable.

**Testing the Effectiveness of the EU’s External Trade Policy: Bilateral Trade Agreements**

Is there a relationship between the EU’s commercial influence and its foreign policy action in trade issues? This question can be clarified with several others. What is the relationship between the geography of trade agreements signed by the EU and the geography of its foreign trade? Does signing a trade agreement have an impact on the strength of trade relations between the EU and a partner country? In general, does the EU’s trade policy, manifested in its trade agreements, change the geography of its foreign economic relations? Or does the geography of these trade agreements conform to a pre-existing geography of functional economic relationships? In the first case, the EU’s foreign policy creates a geographical reality. In the second, it merely confirms a pre-existing reality. These questions refer to the criterion of efficiency presented in the first part of the article.

By using the division of global space implemented above, we tested the relationship between trade agreements and strength of trade relations (table 3). Several conclusions can be drawn from this table. Firstly, the EU’s influence in the Western Balkans and Turkey has declined, despite strong economic ties. This decline comes in spite of the existence of trade agreements with these countries and Turkey’s integration into the European Customs Union in 1995. However, the EU’s share of foreign trade remains the strongest in this first neighboring region. In the other neighboring regions, the situation is paradoxical: in 2007, the EU’s share in foreign trade was higher for countries with which it had not signed agreements. This reflects the EU’s extension of foreign trade towards its eastern neighbors since the 1990s. Conversely, despite the fact

7. Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia.
that the EU signed trade agreements between 1997 and 2007 with all of North African and Middle Eastern countries (with the exception of Libya and Syria), its share in the foreign trade of these countries declined significantly.

In the rest of the world, a difference exists between countries that have signed trade agreements with the EU and those that have not. The former group is much more dependent on the EU than the latter. However, though most of the treaties were signed between 1997 and 2007, the EU’s share of the signatory countries’ foreign trade has declined significantly. Paradoxically, its share remained stable for countries that did not sign bilateral trade agreements. It therefore appears that the EU signed trade agreements with countries in which its commercial influence was already the strongest. On the other hand, these agreements have not had a significant impact on the strength of trade relations between the EU and these countries.

The low impact of trade agreements on trade between the EU and non-EU countries is confirmed by the graph (fig. 4) which shows that the growth of bilateral trade with the EU was much stronger for countries with which it has signed trade agreements (Egypt, Tunisia) than for others (Georgia, Ukraine). We can also see that countries’ trade with the EU stagnated after trade agreements were signed. This is not an exception: all neighboring countries that signed trade agreements with the EU subsequently saw their bilateral trade stagnate or grow less quickly compared to countries that had not signed an agreement. This observation also confirms the significant re-expansion of EU neighborhood trade from the south Mediterranean to the eastern Balkans.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neighborhood 1</th>
<th>EU’s share in national trade in 1997 (%)</th>
<th>EU’s share in national trade in 2007 (%)</th>
<th>Total trade with the EU in 2007 (€ per capita)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>with trade agreement</td>
<td>63.1</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2055.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without trade agreement</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44.9</td>
<td>1474.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Neighborhood 2 with trade agreement | 54.4 | 42.4 | 882.2 |
| without trade agreement | 41 | 44.9 | 1474.3 |

| Rest of the world with trade agreement | 34.5 | 30.9 | 1260.6 |
| without trade agreement | 19 | 18.5 | 440.4 |

Note: Neighborhood 1 includes Turkey and the Western Balkans, Neighborhood 2 includes countries eligible for ENP, as well as Russia.
Sources: IMF, 2011 (trade); FTA Database, EU (trade agreements).
Conclusion

Whether studying the EU or other international actors, international relations scholars give geographical space little weight in their analysis. Geographers have begun to explore this research topic more recently using various methods and approaches (geo-economics, political geography, and geopolitics among others) (Beckouche et al, 2008; Didelon et al, 2008; Beauguïtte, 2010), with a focus on cartography. We should also mention a different approach used in the work of Virginia Mamadouh and Hermann van der Wusten on the EU’s atypical territoriality and the originality of its supranational action compared to state territoriality (Mamadouh 2001; Mamadouh van der Wusten, 2009). Their research shows that it is possible and useful to articulate the methods and concepts of international relations and geography using interdisciplinary methods. The criteria for actorliness can be interpreted and applied geographically in order to analyze the external relations of international political actors, especially the EU. This approach also tests the robustness of other disciplines’ findings and fosters a better understanding of the EU’s place and role in international relations. This method could also be applied to other actors in international relations.

As for the EU’s actorness in international relations, our analysis has led to mixed findings. The EU is an actor in international relations, but only a partial one. The extent of its action is uneven across the various domains. Above all, the second part of this article has shown that the EU’s degree of autonomy in a given international context is ultimately limited. Foreign policy action seems to conform to the existing geography of functional relationships (economic and commercial in this case). In other words, EU’s action is largely determined by the structure and the context in which it finds itself, resulting in a limited capacity to curb these trends beyond the narrow circle of countries where its influence is hegemonic.

Similarly, the coherence of the EU’s foreign policy action has not been proven. The neighborhood, including countries eligible for the European Neighborhood Policy along with Russia, do not seem to be as much a priority as the European Commission’s official communications suggest. In addition, there is a clear contrast between Mediterranean neighbors and those to the East. Coherence between speech and action has therefore not been established. Coherence between different policy areas seems greater, especially between external trade policy and the geography of development aid. However, there is once again a sharp contrast between the two neighborhoods; but inverted this time. Finally, the degree of effectiveness in the EU’s external action is uneven. Trade agreements signed between the EU and non-EU countries have had limited and in some cases no impact. These agreements seem to simply apply a formal framework onto a pre-established relationship. More generally, the geographical study of the EU’s relations with its neighbors could benefit research in international relations by highlighting, for example, the effectiveness of the Northern Dimension or the Union for the Mediterranean by testing the coherence of these regional EU initiatives with its other external actions.

This article has shown that the statements from European Commissioners and the content of many official publications on the EU’s global role should be carefully and critically considered. The EU is certainly an actor who intervenes in many parts of the world, but a weak actor nonetheless. This weakness, associated with a lack of clarity for its partners concerning its internal operations and the deterioration of its image due to the Euro zone crisis, translates into a lack of influence and leadership
in a number of international issues. While it is possible that the EU could come out of the economic crisis with clearer governance, there still remains much to do concerning foreign policy in the strictest sense, as this area still does not admit communitization.

References


